EXPERIENCE and INFLUENCE:

STUDENT and PARENT PERSPECTIVES

of an ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

by

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, education and schooling have been developed by and implemented through the adult perspective. An increasing number of educators and researchers focus on alternatives to mainstream education and this study adds to the growing body of research in this area. Specifically, it gives voice to children and parents at an alternative school. What are the experiences of children? What influences these? How do parents play a role?

Semi-structured interviews with three students and four parents at a publicly funded alternative elementary school in Ontario provide a window into understanding student experiences and influences thereupon. Three main themes emerge: *trust*, *environment* and *community*. Together, these components provide students with some freedom to direct their own learning. Adults, who have been willing to step outside of the traditional perspective of education, are key. The community influences the directions taken at the school according to the needs of students and an increasingly diverse population; however, influences over which they have little or no control can be cause for concern.

Many questions arise from this phenomenological study. Can this type of school support the growth and development of all children? Does it promote elitism? What factors contribute to coercion? These questions invite dialogue not only within this school community, but the larger educational system as well. Mainstream education can learn from this investigation and the questions posed. It requires acknowledging this alternative perspective, examining preconceived notions of schooling and learning, and letting go of control, both as a system and as individuals.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Context

Though the idea for this research project did not enter my consciousness until several years ago, it has been in the making for some forty years. To set the context, I look to my memories, as Eber Hampton (1996) suggests, expanding my knowledge and understanding of the reasons and purposes behind this study. When I began my teaching career in 1990, a graduate of a prestigious Ontario Faculty of Education, I felt ill-prepared to teach my first class of Grade 6 students. Though I had learned educational theory and some instructional and classroom management strategies, I did not know what to teach the students in my care. When the Ontario government introduced the standard Ontario curriculum in the mid-1990s, I was thrilled to have a direction. As a primary and junior teacher I taught, or at least attempted to teach, the mandated curriculum. As with other teachers in the province, I found that, among other problems, there never seemed to be enough time to get through it all. As well, I noticed that, especially around report card time, I became strictly marks-oriented: teach it, test it, and get a mark. I began to wonder what, if anything, my students were learning and what I was actually teaching.

Experience in a variety of diverse situations, along with participation in professional development opportunities, enhanced my pedagogy and understanding of teaching. As I gained a deeper understanding of the curriculum, I began to understand that teachers were not meant to "get through it all." However, something still did not feel right. All around me, it seemed as if children were being forced or cajoled into learning; those who could not cope were sent to special programs while still others stayed in the regular classroom with Educational Assistants. I noticed that more and more students with special needs survived with the help of prescription medication, and I wondered about a system where children needed drugs in order to fit in. Further, I became disheartened that the emphasis on literacy and mathematics seemed to be at the expense of other areas of learning. I began to question the organization of schooling and student discipline, and the purpose behind the mandated curriculum. As I became more aware of what some call the *hidden curriculum* in compulsory schooling, (Gatto, 2005; Holt, 2004;

Illich, 1971; Jackson, 1990), I realized that I wanted, and needed, schooling to be something more than what it seemed to be.

Despite my growing personal discontent with the curriculum and education as I understood it, when I first heard about schools where children are free to direct their own learning, I was skeptical. What could students possibly learn without direction? How would they learn? Was it possible? What about the basics?

Upon reflection, I realized that I had been looking at my questions from the point of view of traditional schooling. Naturally, this perspective made sense to me, as I had grown up in the mainstream system, believing that a student's job was to learn what the teacher taught. As a child I had in fact done just that. I had learned to memorize and regurgitate information. My hard work had always been rewarded with high marks and I felt successful; however, as I began to question and investigate traditional education, the success of high marks came to be less important to me. I realized that I had not really learned how to learn. I had not, in fact, learned the importance of questioning and thinking for myself. Had I been encouraging my students to follow in my footsteps? Was I promoting the status quo? If so, then I wanted, and needed, to look at education differently.

Cora Weber-Pillwax (1999), in her discussion of indigenous research methods, states that, "ideas are always the reflection of some particular researcher's view of the world, put forth to support or invalidate a particular set of political, sociological, and ideological paradigms" (pp. 38-39). Until I allowed myself the freedom to step outside of the traditional perspective, my view of education was one-sided. Now, I believe that individuals learn because they are curious and that learning does not need to be controlled by the content or school structure as initiated by teachers and directed by educational policy makers (Gatto, 2005; Greenburg, 2002; Holt, 2004; Neill, 1960/1992; Ricci, 2009).

My newfound understandings and questions concerning education and schooling have not come without angst. Currently, as a consultant with my School Board, I provide curriculum and pedagogy support to elementary teachers, yet I question and wonder about the traditional system. Do my questions and alternative perspectives fit in? Do I? What is my role in education? I reflect upon these and other questions, and I wonder if

there is a place in this mainstream system for questioning the status quo. Then again, underlying the Ministry curriculum expectations is a focus on critical thinking and inquiry (Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2006a). Students are being encouraged to think from different perspectives and consider alternative points of view. Surely that must be true for educators too? In fact, had I not done that, had I not been open to other possibilities and perspectives, the idea for this research project would likely not have surfaced, and I would never have asked or sought answers to the following research questions.

Research Questions

The Ministry of Education of Ontario (MEO) mandates a set curriculum for the students in the province of Ontario. The Ministry produces documents that outline the mandated curriculum. As indicated on the MEO website, these documents

> define what students are taught in Ontario public schools. They detail the knowledge and skills that students are expected to develop in each subject at each grade level. By developing and publishing curriculum documents for use by all Ontario teachers, the Ministry of Education sets standards for the entire province. (MEO 2005a, *What are curriculum documents, para. 1*)

Subject-specific curriculum documents outline overall and specific expectations and "represent the mandated curriculum" (MEO, 2006a, p. 8). As outlined earlier, I believe that learning does not need to be confined to a set curriculum in this manner. Many others, such as John Taylor Gatto (2005), John Holt (2004) and Daniel Greenburg (1995) hold similar beliefs. Clearly, there are opposing views about education and learning. How do we address these differences? Typically we turn to research to find answers, and, as suggested by John Creswell (2007), in qualitative research we begin by considering the research problem or issue and asking open-ended questions (p. 51).

This research study revolves around the following educational issue: Traditionally, schools are designed and implemented from an adult perspective. That is, educators and theorists determine the curriculum that is to be taught and learned in a particular grade, who will do the teaching, and the physical buildings and space within. In addition, for the most part, adults also research and design appropriate pedagogy and assessment structures and techniques. This adult-designed system does not meet the

needs of everyone, despite various attempts to make this so. In this research, I ask how children see this system, what alternatives are available and how alternatives support student needs? Further, can what we learn about alternatives inform the mainstream system? This issue led me to consider some specific questions concerning the experiences of children at Parkway Alternative (a pseudonym), an alternative public elementary school in Ontario.

The first over-arching question framing the research is this: What are the experiences of children engaged in self-directed learning at an alternative public school? Related questions include the following:

1. What kinds of things do children at this alternative school do?
2. How do they decide what to do?
3. Do these children measure their success? How?

These questions, explored through the voices of children, give us a better understanding of education and learning through their eyes.

Creswell (2007) recommends the use of multiple forms of data (p. 51). Though my main objective is to listen to and give voice to students, the above questions are also asked of parents and thus allow for an investigation of how parents perceive the learning of their children. It is not that I mistrust student responses. On the contrary, I value what children have to say and firmly believe that adults must listen to and consider more often the perspectives of children. Why then have I chosen to include parent perspectives? I do so because education and schooling are adult-designed and implemented. To only have children reflect upon this adult-design would seem one-sided. Furthermore, I thought that adult perspectives would add an important dimension to understanding student experiences. Children do not necessarily see learning or the world as adults do, nor are they always as articulate. In the end, adult voices provide additional valuable information and support a richer discussion.

The second over-arching question in this research study is this: What do parents think of the learning and education of their children at Parkway Alternative? Asked of parents, the following set of sub-questions serves to investigate this:

1. Why do parents choose to send their children to an alternative school?
2. What do parents see as the benefits and challenges of such an education?

3. How important do parents see their involvement in such a school?
Parental perceptions provide an important perspective, another lens through which we can more fully understand student experiences.

The initial intent of the research was to explore the experience of children. In investigating these questions about student experiences and parent perceptions however, I have also inadvertently investigated and reported upon influences on student experiences. This finding was unintentional and seemed to flow naturally as a result of my questions and participant reflections. Though unexpected, it is important to include this information as it frames student experiences and is interesting in and of itself.

To provide some background information about education, schooling, curriculum and alternatives, I turn next to a review of some of the relevant literature. The literature review spans from the early 1900s to the present day and frames the context for the research problem and questions by presenting the perspectives of students, educators, theorists and others in both the mainstream system and alternative realm.

Literature Review

This literature review begins with a brief sampling of the history of curriculum and education from the perspectives of educational theorists Franklin Bobbitt (1918) and John Dewey (1929), as well as policy and practice in Ontario over time. This overview gives us an understanding of the mainstream practice of education currently in place in Ontario. I include a brief discussion of neo-liberal and neo-conservative influences and pressures upon modern-day education, including a look at the concerns associated with increasing demands for accountability. This discussion is intended to make clear some of the tension that exists in our educational practices, and to help demonstrate why our current schooling arrangements do not serve at least some people. Further concerns with the traditional system are the academic and *hidden* curricula and *deficit thinking*. Consideration of these gives us a theoretical look at issues within schools that may be problematic for some, thereby adding to our understandings of the interest in and need for alternatives. I conclude this section with a focus on mainstream youth ranging from the perspective of Kindergarten students to that of early school leavers. Education is traditionally viewed from the adult perspective, and this discussion provides an important

lens through which to understand how students view the mainstream system including some of their concerns and needs.

The next part of this literature review explores some key elements in public and private alternative free schools and the unschooling movement. I include this content because in order to consider alternative viewpoints, we must first understand the philosophies, beliefs and practices surrounding them. To begin with, I explore freedom, choice and democratic participation. These are foundational in the development of many, if not all, alternative options, and knowing these elements is key to understanding this other perspective. Second, I consider the importance of emotions in learning. With this discussion, I aim to show that alternative options do their best to provide atmospheres that are not only free from fear, but that allow children to follow their hearts. Next, I outline how trust and learning are connected. This connection supports the premise that when children in alternative schools are trusted to direct their own learning, they do in fact learn. After that, is an exploration of diversity and learning. In this section I argue that even the needs of those from diverse backgrounds can be served by alternative schools. Finally, I end with a discussion of individual measures of success from the student perspective. I intend to show that some young people are capable of defining success for themselves, without the external markers used in the traditional system. This perspective on education and learning further informs our understandings of the need for alternatives.

The final section of the literature review focuses around three other practices evident within alternatives, and perhaps even some mainstream schools. These are important to consider for two reasons. First, we gain a greater understanding of the beliefs and actions of those who choose alternatives. Second, while some alternative practices may seem extreme, the approaches suggested here signify that there are at least some alternative possibilities for teaching and learning in the mainstream that may meet the needs of more individuals. I will begin with an examination of definitions of self-directed learning. This discussion is intended to show that while there are some similarities to understandings about learning, the alternative philosophy is based upon the belief that children, if given the chance, can indeed learn important concepts and skills without pressure from adults. Not all individuals need adult-direction all of the time, and

thus alternatives, where self-directed learning is centre-stage, are necessary for some. Next, I discuss children as valued citizens. As mentioned previously in this work, children are often left out of the discussions concerning mainstream education, and in alternatives, children have a voice that is valued. Those who seek alternatives acknowledge children as valued members of the group. The final sub-section of this review acknowledges the importance of community. By examining several examples of community engagement, we get a sense of the power of this involvement. The current traditional system does not meet the needs of all individuals, and thus it is important to consider some small steps, informed by alternative perspectives, that may support more individuals in more meaningful ways. All three of these, self-directed learning, children as citizens and community involvement, are significant possibilities for the mainstream system.

Historical Educational Influences

Curriculum development, purpose and content have been the centre of argument and debate for centuries (Flinders & Thornton, 2004). This on-going debate is important to recognize as it relates to present-day concerns over the purpose, form and content of formal education. In 1918, Franklin Bobbitt believed that curriculum

> is that *series of things which children and youth must do and experience* by way of developing abilities to do the things well that make up the affairs of adult life; and to be in all respects what adults should be. (p. 11, emphasis in original)

In other words, Bobbitt believed that the purpose of education was to prepare children for adulthood. Curriculum, therefore, was to be designed to direct and control this preparation.

According to Bobbitt (1918), some learning needed no training as it could be obtained through everyday experiences. He believed, however, that this learning needed to be supplemented "with the conscious directed training of systematized education" (p. 11), and, furthermore, that the content of such training could only be taught through the scientific method. Language development, for example, could be divided into two areas: what one could learn naturally through speaking, and errors, which were a "call for directed training" (p. 12). Curriculum for Bobbitt did not appear to include the interests

of children, or existing complexities of social and economic order (Flinders & Thornton, 2004, p. 3). Therefore, regardless of the individual, adults had the power to determine what children needed, and when.

Conversely, in 1929, John Dewey argued that, "education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform" (p. 22). In other words, in order to influence societal reform, curriculum and training must stem from the social realities of the child within community, not be a preparation for the future. Dewey argued that schools fail if they are merely places to give information and learn specific skills:

> Much of present education fails because it neglects this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. It conceives the school as a place where certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learned, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparations. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative. (p. 19)

He stated that it is not the subject matter that is important, but rather one's relationship to experience: "The progress is not in the succession of studies, but in the development of new attitudes towards and new interests in, experience" (p. 21). Dewey also believed that "the question of method is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of the development of the child's powers and interests. The law for presenting and treating material is the law implicit within the child's own nature" (p. 21). Curriculum then, according to Dewey was to be found in the interaction of child and life, and must consider the individual.

Education has been greatly influenced by the work of Bobbitt (1918) and Dewey (1929), and their ideas continue to be seen in Ontario's educational system today (Flinders & Thornton, 2004). It is precisely this ongoing debate that has prompted the development of alternative schools, such as Parkway Alternative. Thus, it is important to understand how these ideas have influenced education in Ontario so as to better understand the alternative perspective. The next section of this literature review then, explores education in Ontario in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ontario's Historical Educational Debate

Robert Gidney (1999) documents the history of education in Ontario from the mid-1940s to the late 1990s, discussing some of the political, economic and social forces engrained within educational thought and practice. These forces have influenced the beliefs and practices of alternative-minded individuals, and understanding them is therefore a relevant piece for understanding student experiences. Though interesting and relevant, time and space do not permit a full review of this historical perspective. The following, therefore, is a selection of key trends to help set the historical context.

As Gidney (1999) details, in the mid-1950s Canadians complained that, "the education system was failing to produce either the quality or quantity of professional and technical skills the country needed" (p. 38). It was believed that "an investment in education could create 'human capital,' thus supporting economic growth" (p. 38). At that time, however, the high dropout rate, which was not good for the economy, resulted, in part, because "the high school program was rigorously academic and highly selective" (p. 39). Further, "the majority of those who left school early were working-class or minority young people" (p. 39). Social advocates demanded that "every child should have the chance to develop his or her capacities to the fullest extent" and some advocates pushed for radical education and free schools (p. 40). There was, of course, controversy between those who wanted education to support a growing economy and those who perceived that education should be first and foremost about the child and his or her individual needs (pp. 40-41). This concern is precisely one of the arguments for creating alternatives.

By the mid-1960s the Progressive Conservative government commissioned an educational review (Gidney, 1999). In 1965 a provincial committee was appointed to "revise the courses of study" in Kindergarten, and the Primary and Junior Divisions, and study how "modern education can meet the present and future needs of children and society" (Ontario Department of Education, 1968, p. 4). The ensuing report, widely known as *Hall-Dennis*, stated that though education in Ontario had made progress, there was a need to look upon education with fresh eyes (p. 19). During its investigation of education in Ontario,

> The Committee was told of inflexible programs, outdated curricula, unrealistic regulations, regimented organization, and mistaken aims of education. We heard from alienated students, frustrated teachers, irate parents, and concerned educators. Many public organizations and private individuals have told us of their growing discontent and lack of confidence in a school system which, in their opinion, has become outmoded and is failing those it exists to serve. (p. 10)

Hall-Dennis (1968) finds similarities in Dewey's (1929) philosophy and is still relevant today. As Gidney (1999) suggests, *Hall-Dennis* emphasizes "education for personal fulfillment. Education was about self-realization and not about fitting individuals for predetermined economic or social roles" (p. 71). Further, the "fundamental purpose of schooling needed to be 'to learn to learn'" through active engagement, and choice of what, how and when to learn (pp. 73-74).

According to *Hall-Dennis* (1968), for about 50 years there had been relatively few changes in curriculum, and all of these changes had resulted from adult pressures, not the needs of children:

> In many situations the child has been expected to learn, memorize, mimic, regurgitate, and duplicate the pearls of wisdom to which he (sic) is exposed. He is expected to be stuffed or programmed like a computer at any hour of the school day, and to be filled with enthusiasm for every golden nugget cast in his direction. *If the child fails to benefit from the curriculum provided, the assumption often made is that the fault lies with him, and that he is a misfit.* (p. 54, emphasis added)

As will be discussed later, these sentiments are frequently identified as *deficit thinking*. It is important to note that the committee further reported that,

> any policy which predetermines the total structure of a curriculum and attempts to impose it upon all, should be condemned. Such an approach is in complete antithesis to a learning program which seeks to develop the potential of every child. (p. 60)

Deficit thinking and learning programs such as that described by the committee do not serve the needs of all individuals. These in turn support the arguments of those who deem alternatives necessary.

Hall-Dennis (1968) states that a shift to the individualization of learning was necessary in order to "remove the array of labels used to differentiate those children who are splintered off as misfits, failures, and successes" (p. 62). It would seem that committee members and advocates of the report were willing to step outside of the

traditional box of learning and education, willing to see individuals in different ways, for who they were, not for who adults wanted them to become. This perspective has been foundational in the development of alternative schools as these abandon a more traditional, controlled way of thinking about education.

Naturally, there were some who opposed *Hall-Dennis*. James Daly (1969), for example, took a critical look at the report and what it stood for. He begins with the following:

> Optimists may have hoped for a bracing potion, an elixir perhaps, for our schools. At its best, the [Hall-Dennis Report] is good clear water, but at its frequent worst, it is a bucket of molasses, sticky sentiment couched in wretched prose. (p. 1)

Daly critiques not only the writing of the report, but perhaps more importantly, the content and its implementation. Daly predicted that

> The Report will fail, because its objectives are unrealistic and its arguments unsubstantial. But in failing, it may do terrible damage....
>
> There is something like a bandwagon psychosis sweeping through Ontario education today. Many of the Report's suggestions are being attempted without anything like the proper preparations. It is being quoted as Holy Writ without anything like the necessary reflection. (pp. 1-2)

As curriculum continued to be a focus in the province of Ontario, conflict between the ideas of educators such as Daly (1969) and the recommendations in *Hall-Dennis* (1968) became more noticeable in the political arena (Gidney, 1999). In fact, Gidney suggests that *Hall-Dennis* was propaganda that merely echoed the progressive educational reform influenced by Dewey's thinking that was already underway:

> [The Report] provided a 'bully pulpit' from which to preach a particular approach to education to a wider public, and undoubtedly it gave that approach a degree of legitimacy it might not otherwise have had. But it was hardly of decisive importance to the reorientation of pedagogy and the curriculum that was already under way before its publication and that took place after it. (p. 77)

As documented by Gidney (1999), around this time, work began on revising the curriculum. Gidney reported that, in 1975, after numerous revisions, the Ministry published a document titled *The Formative Years,* which outlines

> the objectives to be achieved in the various subjects. It was, in this respect, clearly intended to reinforce the decentralizing impulses of the 1960s: the

> ministry provided the broadest of aims and objectives; the details of what, how, and when were to be left to local people to determine. (p. 81)

The ideas in this document began to be implemented; however, there was much concern over the loss of "the basics" and poor student work ethic. "By the mid-1980s the new 'philosophy' was in retreat and its 'mechanisms' were being dismantled" and dissatisfied parents and teachers demanded educational reform (p. 87). Thus, the 1990s brought change: the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) and the beginnings of a challenging common curriculum in which

> not all students were expected to reach the same level, but all would meet the outcome at one level or another – or, alternatively, would be identified as candidates for remediation. Thus the attempt to give substance to the rhetoric of excellence, equality, and accountability. (Gidney, 1999, p. 219)

There continue to be many concerns with, and influences upon, our current educational practices, and thus the debate between mainstream and alternative education continues. However, despite the conflict between traditional and progressive educational thought it appears that Daly's (1969) argument, at least for the present, is winning the battle in mainstream public education:

> New methods must only be introduced with some caution and after due deliberation. Distinctions between different stages of schooling must be preserved. Teachers must not be asked to choose between competence in teaching-skills and competence in subject-matter. Discipline, competition and examinations must not be recklessly discarded. Above all, the responsibility of adults to guide the young toward maturity must not be abdicated. And the need to control Change, to preserve 'that which endures', must not be forgotten. In a word, the path to real progress must be reopened. (p. 75)

In the following discussion of modern-day education in Ontario, I examine concerns with the current mainstream educational system. This examination is critical to understanding that some are not served by this system, and why individuals might choose an alternative educational setting over a traditional one.

Education Practices in Ontario

An initial look at the vast number of expectations outlined in the Ontario curriculum suggests Bobbitt's (1918) scientific approach to learning; however, a closer

inspection unveils Dewey's (1929) vision as well. The introductory pages of each recently revised curriculum document (for example, MEO, 2007; MEO, 2006a; MEO 2006b) note the importance of considering individual interests and aptitudes, and teaching and learning through critical thinking and inquiry. As well, these documents stress the foundational elements of equity and inclusion, and the value of diverse perspectives. These central messages, however, are often overshadowed by what appears to be a daunting list of subject-specific grade-by-grade overall and specific knowledge and skill expectations. This concern is compounded by an increasing demand for achievement and accountability as measured and reported yearly by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO, 2008, *School, board, and provincial results*), and reinforced by various others such as the Fraser Institute (Cowley & Easton, 2009, *Report card on Ontario's elementary schools*) and the Ministry of Education (MEO, 2010, *School board progress reports*).

What has prompted this increased need for accountability? Is this important for all individuals and families? As will become evident in this section, not everyone is served by such a focus. An exploration of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism will shed light on how the push for accountability can be concerning. After that, I argue that the practices and beliefs surrounding curriculum implementation can negatively impact students. Combined, these factors are influential in the decision to create and choose alternatives for children.

Conflicting pressures: Neo-liberalism and Neo-conservatism

There are many political, economic and social pressures and influences upon education in Ontario that dictate school organization and curriculum. These influences can cause concern for individuals and groups, and as a result some choose educational alternatives. In the discussion that follows, I highlight some of these issues.

Neo-liberals argue, for example, for the privatization of education, which would allow economics to direct educational needs (McLaren, 2007). Of note is that curriculum writing in Ontario involves teachers, and also business groups, "people whose main interest… [is] employability, essentially preparing students for the workplace and being competitive" (Carr, 2006). Dave Hill (2002) contends that this type of education perpetuates capitalism and classism, and produces skilled, but compliant workers

unwilling or unable to question the status quo. This is problematic if one of the important aspects of literacy education, for example, is to support the development of critical literacy skills that "involves asking questions and challenging the status quo, and leads students to look at issues of power and justice in society" (MEO, 2006a, p. 29).

While neo-liberal influences shape education as something to be acquired by "consumers" of the educational process, neo-conservatism focuses on a back-to-basics educational reform that includes traditional knowledge, values and norms (Apple, 2006). The problem here, as Terry Wotherspoon (2004) and Luis Gandin and Michael Apple (2002) discuss, is the question of whose knowledge and values are being perpetuated in schools. Wotherspoon observes that, "official knowledge is distinguished from and given privileged status over other forms of knowledge" (p. 108). Gandin and Apple are concerned that "popular knowledge, knowledge that is connected to and organized around the lives of the most disadvantaged members of our communities, is not [seen as] legitimate" (p. 259).

Historically in Canada, education has been controlled by the beliefs of the dominant group, namely white, Anglo-saxon, male. When the voice of the majority is in control and acted upon, minority perspectives often go unheard. For instance, though First Nations peoples held their own knowledges, these were denied official sanction by European colonizers (Wotherspoon, 2004, p. 55). Certainly there have been efforts to address this concern, as indicated in the revised Social Studies and History curriculum (MEO, 2004); however, this type of thinking persists. As Weber-Pillwax (1999) charges, some universities are not willing to support research or theories that confront their own control over knowledge (p. 36). When certain perspectives are highlighted and others silenced, minority groups and individuals are further marginalized (Wotherspoon, 2004, pp. 114-115).

There are other factors related to neo-liberal and neo-conservative agendas that also influence education, such as the focus on achievement and accountability. What are these factors? Are they important in the decision to attend an alternative school? The following discussion focuses on some problematic issues that may influence, at least in part, such a decision.

Accountability

As reported by Gidney (1999), accountability in education had, over time, become an increasing concern of the citizens of Ontario. By the early 1990s, accountability was a high priority and focus for the NDP government and Ministry of Education and Training. Among various proposed changes, it was determined that outcomes-based learning along with standards was necessary; however, these standards were meant to support teachers in classrooms, not connect to province-wide testing (p. 219). When a draft document of *Everybody's Schools: The Common Curriculum* was leaked in the early 1990s there was much opposition, confusion and anger:

> At a time when 73 per cent of Ontarians said they wanted province-wide testing in schools, they were being offered instead a benchmarks program that (whatever its actual merits) looked like voodoo assessment….and the common curriculum was thrown back for rewriting. (p. 221)

Along with these proposed changes, came the decision "in January 1993, to establish Ontario's first full-fledged royal commission on education since [the Hope Report of 1950], and the first comprehensive review since Hall-Dennis" (Gidney, 1999, p. 224). The commission agreed with the main premise of *The Common Curriculum*, disagreeing, however, with the outcomes it listed stating that they were "too numerous and too vague….and needed to be accompanied by detailed curriculum guidelines" (p. 227). Gidney explains that the commission reiterated earlier concerns with large-scale testing, yet acknowledged the need for accountability and recommended, through sampling rather than province-wide testing, a literacy and numeracy test at the end of Grade 3 and literacy test in Grade 11. "In order to ensure public confidence in the results, test construction, administration, and reporting should be put in the hands of an agency independent of the Ministry of Education and Training" (pp. 229-230).

As a result, the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was created to oversee testing, but, going beyond the commission's recommendations, the government insisted upon "annual, mandatory testing in reading, writing, and mathematics for all students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11" (Gidney, 1999, p. 232). Further, there would be a standard, province-wide curriculum from JK to Grade 12 along with a standard report card that "would clearly indicate each student's level of achievement according to the public criteria established by the outcomes and subject standards."

When the Conservative party was elected in 1995, efforts were focused on the previous government's recommendations. For example, in June 1997, a new elementary curriculum was introduced, replacing *The Common Curriculum*, and bringing with it "the promise of province-wide consistency about what was to be taught when, written in language that parents and the general public could understand" (Gidney, 1999, p. 240). Gidney further reports that initially, universal testing was limited to Grades 3 and 11 with sample testing occurring in Grades 6 and 9, under the previously created EQAO.

Presently, the EQAO website (EQAO, 2008, *School, board and provincial results*) highlights the results of elementary and secondary province-wide testing. Accountability, in theory, is not a problem (Stiggins, 2004). However, there are many issues with this type of large-scale testing.

To begin with, there are concerns regarding official knowledge in large scale testing such as in EQAO tests. Although issues with testing bias have been considered (EQAO, 1999, pp. 14-15), according to Wotherspoon (2004), tests such as these

> like many classroom activities, often rely on knowledge or experiences that may seem to the teacher or tester to be universal but that in fact reflect a particular orientation to reality not shared by all groups. What occurs is that some worldviews are given voice, or legitimized, while others are silenced. (p. 113)

Further, EQAO results, though not the intention of the Ministry, have been linked to economics and social status through information provided by real estate companies that link neighbourhoods and schools with EQAO scores (Real Estate News in Toronto, n.d., *Buying a house in Toronto*, para. 24).

Moreover, the Ministry created a School Finder website (MEO, 2009a, *Find a school or school board*) in which specific demographic information for each school such as parental income level, percentage of newcomers to Canada and special education statistics could be found. Though this online tool, designed to allow one to compare schools and communities, is no longer available (Rushowy & Ferguson, 2009), one has to ask why such information was publicized in the first place? Why does this matter? Does it not promote one population or school over another? If the Ontario education system is really dedicated to reaching every student (MEO, 2008a), then every school in every

neighbourhood should be of high quality where every individual can be successful regardless of parental income, language spoken or special needs.

Individual teachers, schools and school boards are increasingly pressured with student achievement and accountability. The MEO document, *Reach Every Student* (2008a), promotes "success for all." Though some individuals do meet with academic success as identified by high marks, there remain some who may be disadvantaged. For instance, "aboriginal peoples, in general, are the most disadvantaged in Canadian society in terms of educational attainment, employment circumstances, poverty and social conditions … despite substantial improvements that have been achieved through many promising recent initiatives" (Wotherspoon, 2004, p. 217). In addition, Bussière et al. (2001) examined home factors related to socio-economic status (SES) that affect achievement such as family possessions, home educational resources, the number of books in the home, and cultural possessions and activities. Wotherspoon (2004) identifies other factors such as the effects of colonialism and teacher expectations. If *all* groups cannot achieve similar levels of success, what does this tell us? How does this relate to accountability measures? In EQAO, for example, though reading, writing and numeracy are important, does the test measure the right things in the right ways at the right times? Further, how do teachers and schools respond to the added pressure to increase scores? How does this affect students and families?

With the focus on test preparation and "getting through the curriculum," teachers, and even students, lament a decrease in time for the arts. Jean Murray (2008), for example, a Grade 11 student, writes the following:

> So why is music disappearing? The Ontario government's website proudly boasts that test results in reading, writing and math are up, that more students are graduating, and that class sizes are reduced. But where, in all of these 'improvements' are the arts? …The government seems so focused on success in "core academic subjects" that they neglect a subject that imparts all the values they claim to support. (Murray, 2008, p. A.15)

Murray voices an important concern. This is echoed in research conducted by Heather Cunningham (2007). Cunningham interviewed students and teachers, and observed traditional and alternative classrooms. She argues that

> As society changes, so must the school and this means understanding and embracing human differences on many levels. The irony is that the

> curriculum attempts to teach a respect for human difference. But then many students struggle through the 'serious academic' topics, though they may be brilliant in music and art, or woodshop, or athletics. Subjects not given the same clout in the academic world or on the report card will diminish their talents in the end. (p. 141)

Interestingly, over 40 years ago, *Hall-Dennis* (1968) highlighted similar sentiments:

> It must be recognized that there are many children who have special gifts in music or art or drama, but who have no particular interest in the sciences or mathematics or academic disciplines. The curriculum must provide for their progress and for graduation with emphasis in their specialties. These children cannot be branded as failures by the fact that their talents lie in special areas rather than in the traditional disciplines. (p. 13)

Traditional schooling places much emphasis on literacy and mathematics. While these are valuable skills, a focus that diminishes other aspects of learning excludes some individuals. Do these accountability concerns play a role with parents who look for alternatives for their children? What other factors are important?

One other issue concerns the practices surrounding these tests that jeopardize learning (Kohn, 1999; Maylone, 2004; Shepard, 1994; Wassermann, 2007). When too much time is spent on teaching facts rather than learning to think critically about the information, there is often more of a focus on evaluation and grades rather than assessment. Assessment for learning deserves more focus than it is given (Earl, 2006). Despite this increased attention on assessment for learning, static EQAO scores continue to receive high public regard despite prompting to do otherwise by various groups such as The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO, 2009a, *EQAO tests are not a realistic measure*...) and individuals like Alfie Kohn (2009).

Compounding the issues within accountability efforts is the inconsistency with which the curriculum is implemented and the underlying issues with the hidden agenda. The following section addresses these concerns and suggests other possible reasons for alternatives to mainstream education.

Academic and hidden curricula

Ontario curriculum documents continue to be prescriptive, with many *overall* and *specific* expectations for each grade and subject. The most recent version of the language curriculum document (MEO, 2006a), for instance, outlines grade expectations and

"describes the knowledge and skills that students are *expected* to acquire, demonstrate, and apply in their class work and investigations, on tests, and in various other activities on which their achievement is assessed and evaluated" (p. 8, emphasis added).

There are several issues to explore here: First, students are *expected* to acquire the skills and knowledge and be evaluated on these achievements. What if they do not acquire the skills and knowledge? Second, though teachers must teach all of the expectations, they do not necessarily have to evaluate them all (p. 16). Which ones are evaluated? How do teachers decide? Third, there is the concern that teachers may inconsistently teach this mandated curriculum. Wotherspoon (2004) warns that

> Curriculum-established limits to what is officially considered to be 'school knowledge' will vary from setting to setting, depending on such factors as the range of choices that teachers are given in lesson planning, frameworks established through specific core curriculum requirements, and the presence or absence of standardized or provincial examinations based on prescribed content or learning objectives. (p. 109)

The Ontario Ministry produces a plethora of documents for educators. In addition to the curriculum documents, instructional approaches and strategies are explained in various Ontario Ministry documents such as *A Guide to Effective Instruction in Reading, Kindergarten to Grade 3* (MEO, 2003a) and *A Guide to Effective Instruction in Mathematics, Grades 4 to 6: Volume 1, Big Ideas* (MEO, 2006c). The instructional strategies in these guides come from "sound research that has been verified by classroom practice" (MEO, 2003b, p. 3). As the language document states, "Teaching is key to student success. Teachers are responsible for developing appropriate instructional strategies to help students achieve the curriculum expectations" (MEO, 2006a, p. 6). The teacher, it would seem, has a tremendous amount of responsibility regarding student success. Along with adult support to learn the Ontario curriculum, students are also given various levels of responsibility for their own learning. Though they do not typically get to decide what skills they will learn or when, they are expected to gradually take on more responsibility for their own learning, and to "see how making an effort can enhance learning and improve achievement" (MEO, 2006a, p. 6). As children mature, the Ministry believes that they are more capable of taking ownership of their learning.

Contrary to these beliefs and practices, some charge that the control or paternalistic nature of the system fosters, as Gatto (2005) charges,

Intellectual Dependency: "The expert makes all the important choices; only I, the teacher, can determine what my kids must study, or rather, only the people who pay me can make those decisions, which I then enforce" (p.7). What this means is, for example, that whether or not they are interested, Grade 3 children learn about plants and soils; if they want to learn about rocks and minerals they need to wait until Grade 4 (MOE, 2007). While skilled teachers can easily integrate these topics and engage students, it remains that children are not generally offered a choice in the content that is taught and evaluated.

Further to the issue of control, Gatto (2005) also contends that the mainstream school lesson is one of "confusion." He states that, as a teacher, he teaches "the un-relating of everything" (p. 2). As well, he contends that at the elementary level in particular, the discord is much less noticed because young children are easier to coerce than older students. Similar to A. S. Neill's (1960/1992) philosophy of education, Gatto, along with Holt (2004), suggests that children are either *not taught to question* or *taught not to question*. In other words, children who are taught that they cannot learn unless directed by an adult will grow up themselves to be adults who think they need to direct children's learning. This thinking perpetuates the status quo, and continues the cycle. Though children may *learn* the material, they are really learning what is known as the *hidden curriculum*. Holt (2004) theorizes that mandatory schooling teaches that

> If we didn't make you come here you wouldn't learn anything.… Not only do we have to decide what you need to learn, but then we have to show you, one tiny step at a time, how to learn it.… If you want to learn something of any importance, you must get it from a teacher, in a school.… Since other people will tell you whatever is important for you to learn, your own questions are hardly ever worth asking or answering. (pp. 171-172)

He questions not only the necessity of formal schooling, but also the underlying messages of control that lie behind a mandatory curriculum.

Another aspect of the *hidden curriculum* resides in the idea of compulsory education in traditional schools from professionally trained teachers. Ivan Illich (1971) argues for the *Deschooling of Society*. He states that "Most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction" (p. 18). Holt (2004) considers a similar argument. He states that "Education, with its supporting system of compulsory and competitive schooling, all its carrots and sticks, its grades,

diplomas, and credentials, now seems to me perhaps the most authoritarian and dangerous of all the social inventions of mankind" (p. 4). In part, their arguments highlight that learning does not need to be confined to a traditional school building. Both Illich and Holt further argue that learning does not need to come from a trained professional. Instead, Illich states that "education for all means education by all.…The equal right of each man [or woman] to exercise his [or her] competence to learn and instruct is now pre-empted by certified teachers" (p. 32). In short, the formal, traditional schooling system limits teachers and students, and in order to move beyond the limitations intertwined within the system, individuals and groups must be willing to challenge the status quo.

This *hidden curriculum* can be observed in a variety of aspects of the organization of schools, such as how students are treated, the control placed upon them, behavioural demands, what is taught and tested, and the extent to which one achieves academically. Those who experience difficulty learning this standard academic curriculum or *hidden curriculum* are often sent for special education services and may be regarded as emotionally, socially or intellectually deficient. This is a discussion to which I turn next.

Deficit thinking

Because a mandated curriculum requires all students to learn the same material in the same grade, children who for one reason or another do not meet the expected standards appear to have a "problem." This may be connected to the history of special education. Historically, special education knowledge has been viewed through a biological or psychological disability or deficit lens (Skrtic, 1986, p. 92). Through this lens, individuals who differ from the norm need to be "fixed." Even those who have not been given a *special education* label are often seen to be in need of fixing. This type of deficit thinking is problematic. Time, energy and money are spent fixing children when the *problem* may in fact rest with the school (Mercogliano, 1998, p. 35).

Traditionally, for students who are not "successful" or whose needs are not being met, schools develop "alternative schools or classes for intellectually gifted, emotionally impaired, or learning-disabled students" (Wotherspoon, 2004, p. 268). Alternative schools such as these "are designed to serve a specific population, such as youth with disabilities, or unique learning or behavioural issues, teenage parents, or potential school

leavers…. Alternative schooling creates an individualized environment for each student" (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005, p. 78). In extreme cases, for students who are expelled, school boards design specific programs. For example, one program in one Ontario School Board,

> is based on the philosophy and methodology of experiential education in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values. We believe that students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process through the mind, body and spirit. (Waterloo Region District School Board, n.d., *Choices for youth: Introduction,* para. 2)

Clearly, educators understand the importance of individual programming and alternative schooling is one factor protecting students from disengaging or early school leaving (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005). However, The *Early School Leavers Report* also highlights that alternatives are not always available, for example in rural areas, and that more information about and support for alternatives is necessary. However, should this type of alternative programming only be available for those who need "fixing" or are on the verge of disengagement from school? Should these not be available to all individuals?

Thomas Skrtic (1986) recommends a shift in special education knowledge and practice. He maintains that special education knowledge must undergo a multiparadigmatic shift "in the context of a democratized, informed, sustained discourse on the moral, ethical, and political implications of the choice of a frame of reference on the lives of children and youth and their parents and families" (p. 94). He suggests further that this shift must, necessarily, influence general education as well. In a system committed to "success for all" (MOE, 2005b), we must examine the hidden messages, such as *deficit thinking*, underlying the organizational belief structures currently in place and make a shift.

It may be that this will be difficult to accomplish because of the many and varied pressures upon education. Interestingly, it is not only mainstream schools that are influenced by these external pressures. Alternative schools may in fact feel the effects of such external pressures as well. In the United States, "Moore's Creek Open Elementary School [a pseudonym] has operated as a progressive school of choice since it opened in

1973" (Dunn, 1998, p. 1). This inner city school boasts an open school philosophy, which means that it is "student-centred, with an emphasis on respect for the individual and flexibility to meet individual needs" (p. 10). In her research at Moore's Creek, Mary Dunn reports that while standardized test scores are somewhat problematic, it is district end of year testing that is more so. This end of year testing comes with a mandate to adopt a direct instruction model that is "incompatible with open education philosophy" (p. 25). As well, these tests have also "interfered with [a] teacher's flexibility to deviate from the standard curriculum, a technique inherent in the "openness" of open education" (p. 26).

Heather Cunningham (2007) found similar external influences in her research on transformative schooling in Nova Scotia. Cunningham argues that standardization and how teachers view the curriculum impact teacher and student freedom and interfere with progressive ideology:

> The more constraints the teacher feels, the more he or she must follow a specific lesson with a specific outcome and involvement students are able to have. One cannot effectively teach values of freedom and democracy in a space that is not free and not democratic. (p. 109)

Within a system that is focussed on standards and accountability, is it possible to discard *deficit thinking* altogether? Such sustainable change like this, as Cunningham argues, must be system-wide.

The *Hall-Dennis Report* of 1968 stresses the frustration and anger of students, parents and educators at outdated curricula and materials, and the need for change. Because children are influenced by their experiences in school, listening to the youth perspective is an essential component of making this change wide-reaching. Accordingly, the next section of this chapter considers this point of view.

The youth perspective

Educators clearly have varying perspectives on the matter of schooling and curriculum. If adults had all of the answers then, presumably, all students would find school, or at least learning, to be successful and rewarding. However, anyone who has ever spent time in an elementary or secondary school knows that this assumption is inaccurate. Therefore, it is important to consider what children and youth have to say about education.

The *Early School Leavers Report* (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005), written for the MEO, acknowledges varying numbers of early school leavers. According to the report, Nunavut has "the highest rate at 67.4% … In contrast, Ontario has the lowest rate with 15.9%" (p. 60). Traditionally, a Grade 12 diploma indicates success and it is those who graduate who have more opportunities. As these early school leaver rates signify, the education system as it exists today is not working for every child.

Not every child is at risk of becoming a school leaver; however, a consideration of those who do offers an important perspective. First, those who leave school may in fact be successful, though their departure from school seems to indicate otherwise. Generally, success depends on how one chooses to define it. In a different environment or with a different educational focus, such individuals just might be successful. Could this be an influential component of an alternative educational choice? For example, Cunningham (2007), in her exploration of progressive education, conducted research that includes, among others, students at a publicly funded alternative high school in Nova Scotia. The alternative school supports students "who are deemed academically capable but still struggle in the regular classroom" (p. 70). Students at this school experience more success than in the mainstream system and are encouraged to "follow their own paths" (p. 120). Students are much more involved in and connected with their education, they feel they belong and are accepted as individuals with individual interests and needs.

Second, if we understand why individuals choose to leave school early, we can better understand not only their needs, but also perhaps how changes to the system might benefit others. The *Early School Leavers Report* (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005) acknowledges the importance of listening to the youth, as it "fills a gap in the research and policy literature on the process" of early school leaving from the perspective of youth and parents (p. 1). Among other concerns, students across various sub-groups highlight "issues with passive or irrelevant curriculum" (p. 1). Irrelevant curriculum as identified by these individuals includes its Eurocentric nature and lack of connection to student present realities and future plans.

As well,

> early school leavers are more likely to perceive their school environment as unrewarding, have negative interactions with their teachers and experience social and academic problems. The reality for many youth is

> that schools are uncomfortable and unnatural places for them to be. (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005, p. 67)

If schools are indeed "uncomfortable and unnatural" for many youth, there is a problem. Schools ought to be places where children *want* to be and where they can experience a personal, emotional connection to learning as discussed later in this literature review. Wotherspoon (2004) reports that

> schooling and learning are about much more than simply acquiring and repeating information.... In many educational settings, not high test scores but the extent to which all students can gain access to meaningful social opportunities and experiences is the mark of student and school success. (p. 256)

Alternative schools may provide such an atmosphere.

Certainly, at least by Wotherspoon's (2004) standards, students who have unrewarding educational experiences are not achieving success in school. Some do not learn to question and think for themselves; others become disengaged and may leave. It is not the purpose of this research to distinguish between who does "well" in school and who does not. This study, in examining the experiences of individuals in an alternative school, seeks to understand that which might help all, not just those who are unsuccessful by academic standards, or the "norm." How can schools become better places for youth to succeed? What if they were given choices and options?

In the present elementary educational system, students are indeed given some options, as in topics for research, differentiated products and electives. However, in the current system of a mandated curriculum, are students really free to make authentic choices or has the structure of the system already made the decisions? Kohn (1999) discuses this concern. He states, for example, that "children may [decide] what they assume the adult wants to hear" rather than choose for themselves (p. 253). Further barriers include "the practice of letting children *think* they are making a decision when they have no real power to do so" (p. 254, emphasis in original).

Similarly, Wotherspoon (2004) believes that "our thoughts, personalities, and actions [are] heavily influenced by our social background and surroundings" (p. 7). An individual creates her own reality within the confines of the social structures around her. In school, for instance, students may be offered choices, but if their decisions are unacceptable by teacher standards, there are often consequences. In making decisions, the

child either perpetuates the norm in school and society or questions it. One of the expectations inherent in the Ontario curriculum is that of critical thinking. If this is indeed a desirable outcome of education, adults must be willing to accept the fact that children might not always come to the same conclusions and decisions as adults. Students must be allowed the opportunity to define and have control over their own success. Learning and success must not be defined and measured merely through adult eyes or test scores. Alternative schools, I argue, provide this opportunity for success to be defined on an individual basis.

On the other hand, some transcend the external measure of success. For example, despite the negative adult measurement thrust upon him, Carlo Ricci (2005) emerged successful from his schooling experience, earning both a master's and doctorate degree. He explains his experience in the following way:

> my high school teachers had me all wrong. Their assessment of me did not reflect my "capabilities," but my level of obedience: I challenged their system and did not accept and do everything they said and wanted in the way that they said and wanted it done, for this I was punished. This type of schooling is not conducive to creating a democratic citizenry who are willing to participate and challenge the injustices with our society. (p. 2)

Ricci has come to the conclusion that

> We need to rethink our curriculum. We need to ask ourselves if what students are asked to do in schools is worth doing. It's time that we challenge the expert-driven curriculum, and place it back where it belongs: in the hands of students, parents, teachers and local communities. (p. 3-4)

In a similar way, the *Early School Leavers Report* (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005) recommends improving curriculum and pedagogy, and comments on early prevention strategies. Early prevention strategies are meant to target the "awareness of the importance of elementary education in the process of early leaving" (p. 48). This early strategy is vital because

> The process of early high school leaving often begins years prior to the act of school withdrawal, and has proven to be related to countless events, experiences, and choices that occur throughout the life of an adolescent, beginning as early as before a child enters elementary school and continuing throughout high school. (p. 74)

How do Kindergarten experiences influence early disengagement? Do very young children feel unnatural and uncomfortable when they are forced to leave their families

and attend school with strangers? Educators in the early years often deal with tearful children who want to go home or anxious children who refuse to talk. The goal is often to get the child into the classroom so that she will forget how she is feeling. Rather than exert such control, families need options. A parent at the Beach School in Toronto stated that,

> when our oldest daughter was 4, we tried the public system. Whenever I brought her over for kindergarten, she cried. After just a few months, she asked if she could go to a different school. I listened. She tried the Beach School and has been there ever since. She gets upset at the mere mention of going anywhere else. (Simpson, n.d., *Why choose the Beach School*, para. 7)

On the other hand, Ricci's (2009) daughter, Annabel, was thrilled to be starting at a mainstream school, largely because "all of her neighbourhood…and television friends go to school and that so many people around her have made such a big deal about her approaching school age" (p. 4). At dinner on the second day of Junior Kindergarten Annabel shared her experiences of the day:

> She mentioned that she was not allowed to sit beside her best friend. Incidentally, her friend being there is one of the biggest reasons, if not the biggest reason, for why she wants to go to school. As well, she mentioned that during snack time she is not allowed to talk with her friends, [or] drink water from the drinking fountain. Furthermore, she mentioned that she did not really like the snack that was provided for her…. The children have to eat whatever is provided whether it is healthy or not and whether they like it or not. (p. 4)

Annabel was also given homework that neither she nor her parents realized she *had* to do.

Ricci (2009) believes that Annabel's experience demonstrates the undemocratic nature of our schools, highlighting that children do not have a real, meaningful voice. Ricci will likely continue to challenge the system, as he did with the school's homework policy, not only on a large-scale level, but on a personal level as well:

> I continue to hope that my daughter becomes so disillusioned with schooling that she decides to leave. In the meantime, I continue to talk to her about and I continue to disagree with her decision to attend, but I do continue to consent to her right to lead her own life. (p. 13)

Is Annabell too young to make such a decision? Will this cause conflict for her? Will she be caught between her father's ideology and her friends? Perhaps. Only time will tell how this will affect her in the end. Interestingly, when I talk about non-traditional schools at

family dinners, a 12-year-old relative wonders "How can I get involved in this type of school?" When I suggest that he would have to move because there is no alternative school in his area, he shakes his head. Despite his own growing discontent with his traditional school, he would rather stay where his friends are.

I agree with Ricci (2009) that "children are among the last acceptably oppressed groups and that we need to advocate for their rights" (p. 2). Both he and the Beach School parent quoted above have done this by listening to and giving power to the voice of their children. Does this create youth who feel entitled and will not listen to authority? Or does this create individuals who are willing to trust themselves and challenge popular thinking when it is undemocratic?

Eber Hampton (1996) suggests that educators spend too much time controlling emotions in classrooms. If more time were spent understanding children's perspectives and less time directing and controlling them and their learning, then perhaps fewer individuals would become disengaged. Is it sufficient to only target high school youth? When are children "old enough" to begin to take ownership and responsibility? In order to answer these questions, it is vital that we understand the experiences of children at the elementary school age and listen to their interests, needs and concerns. Furthermore, it is valuable to understand education from the non-traditional point of view.

Various radical alternative free schools around the world provide environments where children of all ages are free to follow their own paths (Greenburg, 1995; Mercogliano, 1998; Neill, 1960/1992). To support an understanding of why such environments are appealing, these alternatives will be explored next.

What Alternatives Offer

To begin to understand alternatives to the traditional system it is important to first examine the term *alternative*. In many Ontario schools, alternative refers to special education classes or programs as a subset of the regular or mainstream school. Earlier in this review I briefly examined the idea of this type of alternative. However, alternative is often also used to mean something else, and thus it is important to make the distinction:

> The term 'alternative' is ambiguous; for some people…it implies schools for "at risk" youth only, rather than being for the education of all children and often for adults as well. So sometimes it is useful to distinguish

> "philosophical alternatives" from the "at-risk alternatives." These philosophical alternatives include educational options for the developmental needs and learning styles of all children. (Martin, 2002, *An exploration of learner-centred…,* para. 6)

Throughout the remainder of this review, *alternative* will be used in reference to schools or philosophies that are not "regular" or "mainstream." These alternatives may in fact be subsets of the mainstream school or they may have been created independently. Regardless, the key is that these alternatives are available for all individuals at any grade level, not just those considered "at-risk." Alternatives such as these have been created in an attempt to free individuals from traditional educational practices and beliefs by offering children the opportunity to influence their own education, and hence the people they will become.

Because there is such a plethora of possible school choices, an additional distinction needs to be made about the type of school to which I refer. The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)

> is considered by many to be the primary hub of communications and support for educational alternatives around the world. Education Alternatives include, but are not limited to, Montessori, Waldorf (Steiner), Public Choice and At-Risk, Democratic, Homeschool, Open, Charter, Free, Sudbury, Holistic, Virtual, Magnet, Early Childhood, Reggio Emilia, Indigo, Krishnamurti, Quaker, Libertarian, Independent, Progressive, Community, Cooperative, and Unschooling. (AERO, n.d., *About AERO*, para. 1)

Not all of these schools fit into my definition of alternative. For instance, children at Montessori schools have some freedom; however, trained Montessori teachers closely control the environment. "It is the role of the teacher to prepare and continue to adapt the environment, to link the child to it through well-thought-out lessons, and to facilitate the child's exploration and creativity" (Mayclin Stephenson, 2010, *An introduction to Montessori philosophy and practice…*, para. 1). Similarly, in the Waldorf philosophy, it is believed that "understanding the needs and stages of childhood is critical to the success of an education" (Petrash, n.d., *Waldorf education: Educating the whole child*, para. 2). Further, "the entire academic program, including the teaching of math and science, is purposefully integrated with art, movement, and music" (Petrash, n.d., *Waldorf education*, para. 4). While each of these schools are valuable alternatives and students are

provided with certain amounts of freedom, they are not the type of alternatives on which I focus. Rather, the focus in this section is on democratic or free schools in which the

> primary purpose is to create a safe environment where children can learn freely, that is without the use of force or coercion, drawing on children's curiosity to lead their own learning.
>
> Many free schools are structured in ways that often lead them to be democratic schools as well, where staff as well as students have an equal vote….
>
> The role of the children is to learn, with the expectation that they will follow their own interests. In addition, students are expected to serve as responsible community members, following the rules of the community or facing the consequences. The role of teachers and parents varies from school to school. (Martin, 2002, *Democratic free schools,* para. 1-3)

Various educators have initiated educational change from such non-mainstream or radical perspectives where both children and adults have a valued, respected voice, and where children are offered the freedom to direct their own learning. Why might it be important to consider these alternative perspectives? Ricci (2009) offers a suggestion:

> We need to reclaim our democratic rights as children, parents, teachers, principals, and citizens. We need to explore more democratic alternatives that prove to be working without grades, without homework and without coercion. We need to challenge the mindless myths that have been so ingrained in mainstream schooling. We need to face up to the reality that far too many children and those working within schools are so dissatisfied and being damaged. It's beyond time to explore meaningful and substantive democratic learner-centred alternatives like unschooling and free schooling on a larger scale. (pp. 11-12)

With Ricci's thoughts in mind, in the following section I highlight various aspects of alternative schools in England, the United States and Canada such as freedom, trust, democratic participation and individual success. It is aspects such as these that appeal to those who look for alternatives.

Freedom, choice and democratic participation

In 1921, A. S. Neill, disillusioned with state schools, founded Summerhill, in Suffolk, England (Neill, 1960/1992). It has become,

> one of the most famous schools in the world, and has influenced educational practice in many schools and universities. The democratic schools movement is now blossoming internationally, with many schools far and wide being based upon the philosophy of A. S. Neill or inspired by reading his books. (A.S. Neill's Summerhill, 2004, *Introduction to Summerhill*, para. 8)

Summerhill is run democratically. Weekly meetings offer children and adults an equal vote on matters of importance (Neill, 1960/1992, p. 16). However, they "never ask children to decide on things that are beyond their ability" or interest (p. 18).

Neill (1960/1992) believed that, "the greatest reform required in our schools is the abolition of that chasm between young and old which perpetuates paternalism" (p. 4). He argued that this paternalism had existed within public educational institutions since the beginning of formal schooling, and it commanded that those who are older have authority over the young and know what is best for them. This authority included the right to dictate what a child would learn and when, as identified in a formal, standard curriculum. Neill argued further that such forced learning is soon forgotten, as it is of no interest. Accordingly, Summerhill is organized such that students decide whether or not to go to class. As Neill explained, regardless of whether or not students attend classes, "there is a lot of learning in Summerhill" (Neill, 1960/1992, p. 10).

Neill (1960/1992) believed that traditional schools were wrong to be "based on an adult conception of what a child should be and of how a child should learn" (p. 9). He questioned why curriculum had become standardized saying that most school work is a waste of time (pp. 103-104). Also, he suggested that because curriculum is set by university entrance exams, children learn it just for the test. According to Neill, such practice is not true learning; rather, it has similarities to Paulo Freire's (1970) metaphor of the banking method, designed to "encourage passivity in the oppressed" (p. 129). If information is simply deposited, rather than experienced, it is questionable whether or not individuals are really learning. Though Neill questioned the set curriculum, he did not try to change it; he simply offered children the freedom to choose.

Windsor House, an alternative public school in British Columbia, also provides children with a noncoercive learning environment. Sherry Sakamoto and Terry Martyniuk (2004) produced a documentary where community members share their thoughts about the school. One person said, "students get the freedom to make their own decisions and create their own paths and to explore their own passion." Another indicated that the school provides "an opportunity for kids to just be who they are and without having to fit into the constraints of what somebody else thinks they should be."

How does this freedom impact learning? A look at learning and emotions provides some insight.

Emotions and learning

For Neill (1960/1992), an important aspect of learning is feelings or emotions. This is important to acknowledge when attempting to understand the reasons behind choosing alternatives. Emotions are at the centre of true learning, and according to Neill, without choice, emotions are ignored or devalued; this becomes problematic if one believes that what children think or feel about learning and life is important. Neill believed that "a child's emotions are infinitely more important than his [or her] intellectual progress" (p. 101). One of his stories helps us to understand his perspective on emotions:

> I have seen a girl weep nightly over her geometry. Her mother wanted her to go to university, but the girl's whole soul was artistic. I was delighted when I heard that she had failed her college entrance exams for the seventh time. Possibly, the mother would now allow her to go on the stage as she longed to do. (p. 108)

This would require, I believe, letting go of fear as Chris Mercogliano (1998) suggests.

Mercogliano (1998) discusses the prevalence of fear in society that, as he contends, stems from adults "being hung up on academic achievement" (p. 60) and how the cyclical nature of fear affects children: "Regrettably, though, kids invariably become infected [with fear] as well, and their natural, inborn desire and will to learn gets stifled in the process." Those who seek and create alternatives believe that "the antidote to fear is trust" (p. 68). However, even adults who believe in an alternative philosophy are not immune to fear (p. 59). A teacher at The Albany Free School, Mercogliano shares the story of one student, Abby, and how her Grandmother's fear spread to the child and contributed to her stress, disinterest and tears (p. 66-67). Thankfully for Abby,

> her parents and teachers were able to keep their fear in check and allow her to develop according to her own internal schedule. Perhaps even more important, they managed to maintain their belief that Abby's learning belonged to her. When she learned, it was for her own reasons. At every turn, the motivation came from within and not from without (pp. 67-68)

As discussed by Mercogliano (1998) this relates to Leslie Hart's (1983) research on the brain and learning. Hart says, "Learning involves emotions" (p. 102). Further, that

> If we now remind ourselves that virtually all academic and vocational learning heavily involves the neocortex, it becomes plain that *absence of threat is utterly essential to effective instruction.* Under threat, the cerebrum downshifts – in effect, to greater or lesser extent, it simply ceases to operate." (p. 109, emphasis in original)

So, what do we do with the knowledge that the "absence of threat is utterly essential to effective instruction?" We let go of fear that our children will somehow not measure up. In doing so, we honour their own feelings and emotions. As well, we consider, as Neill (1960/1992) suggests our pre-service education students, for as he witnessed, they

> have been taught to *know*, but have not been allowed to *feel*. These students are friendly, pleasant, eager but something is lacking – the emotional factor, the power to subordinate thinking to feeling…. Their textbooks do not deal with human character, or with love, or with freedom, or with self-determination. And so the system goes on, aiming only at standards of book learning – goes on separating the head from the heart. (pp. 107-108)

In order to let go of fear and embrace the importance of emotions in learning, I believe, we must be willing to rethink our priorities for children, and for ourselves. Such a focus suggests, as does *Hall-Dennis* (1968), that our educational system can no longer focus its efforts on traditional subjects like reading and mathematics as a measure of success. If this educational shift happened, how would children learn the basics? Can children become literate, for example, without regimentation? The following section explores the possibilities.

Trust and learning

Similar to Summerhill, Sudbury Valley School (SVS) was founded in 1968 in Framingham, Massachusetts "as a place where each student could be trusted fully to make every decision about how to grow from a child into an adult" (Greenburg & Sadofsky, 1992, p. 5). According to a SVS graduate and proponent of this educational model, "in a school where kids don't have anyone telling them to do this and not that, people develop their own interests in a way that doesn't follow a chart of any kind" (M. Greenburg, 2002, p. 8). In other words, the school philosophy and reality is that children develop when they are ready.

This trust is evident not only in the development of students' decision-making skills, but also the development of skills such as reading:

> At Sudbury Valley, not one child has ever been forced, pushed, urged, cajoled, or bribed into learning how to read. We have had no dyslexia. None of our graduates are real or functional illiterates. Some of our eight year olds are, some ten year olds are, even an occasional twelve year old. But by the time they leave, they are indistinguishable. No one who meets our older students could ever guess the age at which they first learned to read or write. (D. Greenburg, 1995, p. 35)

Similarly, Robert Gottlieb, a former student at Summerhill in the early 1960s, did not learn to read early (Neill, 1960/1992). The interest in reading and writing "didn't arrive until the age of eleven, largely as a result of the influence of Summerhill. Today Gottlieb is an Executive Vice-President of a large talent agency and, in fact, is head of their Literacy Department" (p. xi). Another student, David Gagnon, attended alternative schools since about Grade 4, and in an interview with Matt Hern (2008) shares some insights into his experiences:

> I didn't read a book till I was seventeen years old. Years of shame and "failure" in regular school ensured I never wanted to read, ever! I got past most of that by age fourteen (when I got the internet at home) and started teaching myself to read. It was around that time that I began to understand what my dyslexia was and how it affected me. Reading was tricky, but my teenage mind was developed enough that I could use my reasoning skills to hammer things out (which I had not been able to do at age eight). I suspect that I could have done this and learned to read by age ten or twelve if I hadn't been running from past experiences. (pp. 131-132)

Despite this anecdotal evidence to the contrary, the Ministry implies that children will not become "successful language learners" without adult interference or research-based teaching strategies (MEO, 2003a). The MEO provides teachers with guides to support literacy instruction in the both Primary and Junior grades. These guides provide teachers with research-based knowledge about reading acquisition, along with strategies and approaches to support students. For example, *A Guide to Effective Instruction in Reading, JK-3* (MEO, 2003a) "is based on the findings of and advice set out in *The Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario*, [and] contains information derived from research on instructional and assessment practices and supports that have proved to be effective in improving student achievement in literacy" (p. 1). Further to general recommendations, effective reading instruction compensates for risk factors that might otherwise prevent children from becoming successful readers (p. 3).

On the one hand, researchers in the field of literacy development present valuable strategies to support reading instruction (Clay, 2005; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Miller, 2000), yet there is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that at least in part, some individuals simply need time or individual motivation or purpose (D. Greenburg, 1995; Hern, 2008; Neill, 1960/1992). Can we successfully offer freedom while ensuring the Ontario Ministry's mandate of "literacy for all?" Is it possible for these two opposing views to co-exist amicably? David Gagnon (Hern, 2008) had a supportive home life, but what about others who have "risk" factors? Are we willing to chance that some individuals may not become literate without adult intervention?

These are just a few of the questions related to this issue of direct instruction of reading within a specified time frame. A partial answer may rest in our willingness to question assumptions about formal education and schooling as other educators have done (Gatto, 2005; Holt, 2004; Neill, 1969/1992; Ricci, 2005). Can the traditional system even imagine a different perspective? Holt (2004) wondered about this. Curious about the research on reading, he asked educators if they knew of any studies concerning self-taught readers. None, it would seem, had ever heard of such research. At first, Holt found it odd that this question had gone unasked, but then came to the following conclusion:

> It is not strange at all; the answer to this question might be dangerous. It might show once again that our most rapid, efficient, far-reaching, useful, and permanent learning comes from doing things that *we ourselves* have decided to do, and that in doing such things we often need very little help or none at all. (pp. 15-16, emphasis in original)

Individual learning of this sort requires a great leap of faith. Does this have a place in the traditional system? Is there any proof that this type of freedom results in "successful" adults? Indeed there is.

Of Sudbury Valley, Daniel Greenburg (1995) states, "Everything about the school conveys our belief that *any human interest is a worthwhile pursuit if only it has been chosen freely and followed from true inner desire*" (p. 183, emphasis added). Is any human interest really worthwhile if freely chosen? Does the mainstream system believe this? If so, why do we continue to focus on accountability and achievement as it only relates to literacy and mathematics? Regardless of what SVS graduates pursue,

> The common thread that binds them all is the realization that their years of growth were not taken away from them. At Sudbury Valley, they kept their childhood as long as they wished… Our greatest gift to them was to let them be. By not robbing them of what was truly their own, we did more for each one than any army of "helpful" people could ever have done. (p. 184)

Several studies have been conducted with Sudbury Valley graduates to investigate the "kind of adults [that] develop from children who have been trusted to determine the course of their own education" (Greenburg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005, p. 7). According to a 2005 study, SVS alumni were interviewed about their character, quality of life and world views (p. 13). The resulting interview data was presented in quantitative form through various tables and figures, and qualitatively as direct participant comments (p. 359). Individuals with no affiliation to SVS conducted the research via telephone interviews. As indicated by the authors

> The responses we sought were the personal, subjective views of the respondents as they talked about their own lives. What was important to us was how the respondents feel about their lives, how they evaluate their situations, without reference to external criteria. We proceeded from the point of view that in the last analysis each person determines his own set of values and sets his own goals, and each person must decide for herself whether her life is fulfilled and her goals are being realized. (p. 13)

While acknowledging that "neither this study nor any retrospective study of any school's alumni can prove a direct link between the program offered by the school and the adult lives of former students" (p. 14) this mixture of qualitative and quantitative data provides much information about graduates' personal and professional lives. For example, one former SVS student said,

> I like my books, I like the internet, I like my friends, and I like the fact that I went to Sudbury Valley. I think I'm able, as a result of going to Sudbury Valley, to ask questions all the time and I think that's very important. (p. 157)

From a school "that has never had any curriculum – not a "core" curriculum, not a "fun" curriculum, but no curriculum at all" (p. 5), graduates are generally pleased with their occupations "which run the full gamut of possibilities, from traditional to exceptional" (p. 29). According to the study, those who are unsatisfied for various reasons know what to do to make changes such as examining personal and professional interests and priorities, furthering their education, and developing plans to reach goals (pp. 39-43).

Along with jobs, there were many other categories investigated, such as post-secondary education, values and relationships. The researchers found that the majority of graduates were pleased with these aspects of their lives.

Clearly, proponents of Sudbury Valley know that a child needs the freedom to direct his or her own learning, and the trust to do so. Admittedly, the Sudbury Valley community acknowledges that their student population is somewhat advantaged (Greenburg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005). Does this type of education support children from all backgrounds? To begin to answer this question, I next explore the concept of diversity in an inner-city alternative school in the United States and various Canadian alternatives.

Diversity and learning

Freedom and trust have the potential to support all individuals, not only those from the dominant group (Mercogliano, 1998; Wasserman, 2007). Despite much opposition, in 1969 Mary Leue opened an alternative free school in inner city New York (Mercogliano, 1998). This school, The Albany Free School, is

> the longest running inner-city independent alternative school in the United States. We offer a unique alternative to traditional models of education by giving children complete freedom over their learning. Students at the school, many whom have slipped through the cracks of today's increasingly regimented school system, flourish in a nurturing environment that allows them the freedom to chart their own course of learning while fostering their emotional growth. (The Free School, 2007, *About the Free School...,* para. 1)

For 40 years The Free School has supported children from diverse backgrounds, including middle-class, working-class, lower-class and poor, and whites, blacks and Hispanics (Mercogliano, 1998, pp. 8-9). According to Mercoglicano, this has been made possible through minimal tuition amounts, community support and apprenticeships with non-traditional teachers. Mercogliano shares many stories of how children have been supported in this environment. For instance, a young boy with "a long history of [traditional] school troubles, both academic and behavioural" (p. 38) learned woodworking from a neighbouring carpenter. Another story highlights a boy who came from the mainstream system with an ADHD label who learned to care for an ill bird from a wildlife rehabilitator. In both of these cases, these boys were interested in the topics and

concentrated easily on what they wanted to learn. They were not forced or coerced, nor did they learn at a desk in a classroom. This type of experience is key to understanding the philosophy behind alternative schools and the practice within.

Mercogliano (1999) devotes an entire chapter to a "tightly strung, high-energy kid," a three year old named Mumasatou (p. 21). Though she needed to have limits placed upon her, for her own safety and that of others, the staff chose to "recognize that Mumasatou's developmental track was as unique as she was" (p. 34). While Mumasatou only stayed at the school a few years, in that short time she made great gains in social and academic matters. There was no one particular method that worked for Mumasatou; however, it was likely the consideration of her individual unique nature, rather than in trying to make her conform. Mercogliano reflects that regular

> schools create problem children by treating them mechanistically, as though they were uniformly square pegs supposed to fit through equally uniform round holes. What is it that keeps us from recognizing that the way schools treat children is so very often the cause of the supposed symptoms? ...had we demanded of Mumasatou that s*he* conform to *our* regimen, we would have been the problem. (p. 35, emphasis in original)

Clearly, children from diverse backgrounds can be supported through such a school. However, according to Mercogliano, in the beginning it was rather difficult for "conservative lower-class white, black, and Hispanic parents" (p. 9) to accept that their children could indeed learn in such a free environment. "To these doubtful parents, [the] school represented the fast track to failure and low status" (p. 9). However,

> Those who took the leap of faith quickly became heartened by how totally their kids threw themselves into the daily life of the school. They were equally impressed by the immediate improvement in their overall attitude toward learning and by their obvious jumps in maturity. (p. 9)

The Free School has worked many years to help all children, families and community members break out of the confines of traditional schooling.

Alternative schools in Canada also strive to remove themselves from being part of the problem in education. According to Selma Wassermann (2007), there is a large ethnic make-up of the students at a child-centred alternative public school in Vancouver. Though there are some English Language Learners who do not yet meet the provincial writing standards, the majority of children meet or exceed grade level standards. Achievement and success, however, are not determined solely on these scores. "Each

child's learning needs are met along a continuum of progress... [and] each child may work at his or her own level" (p. 388). According to the principal, the school emphasizes student efficacy and individual success (p. 388). Though the demographic information is limited, the diverse population in the aforementioned school, including First Nations children, highlights the potential for self-directed learning to support individuals who face oppression based on factors such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and socio-economic status.

In Ontario, "students in independent schools and home schools count for 6% of Ontario's students" (Ontario Federation of Independent Schools, n.d., *Independent education in Ontario…*, para. 1). Certainly, not all independent schools match my earlier definition of alternative. However, it is important to investigate those where students are more involved in the school organization and therefore their own learning. For example, the Toronto District School Board website lists over 40 alternative public schools that "offer students and parents something different from mainstream schooling" (Toronto District School Board, n.d., *Alternative schools*, para. 1). There are some schools, such as ALPHA, Beaches and City View, in diverse neighbourhoods in Toronto. Although I do not have a complete listing of the diversity of the school populations, according to their School Profiles on the Board website the percentage of students whose primary language is other than English ranges from 3% to 16%. Of ALPHA, Ryan Slashinsky (2006) reports that

> The families predominantly identify as white, with several children having mixed racial backgrounds, but in terms of economic and educational capital are quite varied. There are a significant number of non-nuclear family arrangements, which include single or separated parents, shared housing, and queer couples. (p. 28)

While there are other factors related to diversity, this information suggests that there is at least some diversity at such schools.

These alternative schools vary in different ways, each "unique, with a distinct identity and approach to curriculum delivery" (Toronto District School Board, n.d., *Alternative schools*, para.1). Parents seek out these schools for various reasons. In one school for example, "The school's mandate of educational freedom is obviously the major attraction for families seeking schooling alternatives. New parents speak of their

support for the collaborative learning environment, where marks, tests, and competitions of any kind are absent" (Slashinsky, 2006, p. 29).

Some might wonder how we would know if children are really learning important information and skills if there are not marks and tests. Where freedom and trust abound, individuals themselves hold the answer. In an educational system designed for children then, we must value their voices. In the next subsection, I highlight the student voice specifically regarding alternative education.

Individual measures of success: The student voice

Traditionally, success is measured through grades, tests and report cards. While these may be valuable to some, not all individuals need these external markers. In alternative schools, it is the internal satisfaction of learning something new that is meaningful and it is this internal measure of success that is key. Further, in alternative schools teachers do not measure this success, but rather it comes from the student. Students at alternative schools have had various opportunities to share their perspectives on education and success, and I examine some of these in the following.

The Sudbury Valley website (Sudbury Valley School, n.d., *Video excerpts*) includes links to two anniversary documentaries which feature former students who share their experiences at the school and their lives now. In the 25th anniversary video, former student, Keith Clark, commented that in the mainstream system he had become a "stressed out and stifled person." He decided to attend Sudbury Valley in his senior year of high school and once he let go of external pressures and influences, he appreciated the freedom to be himself. He said that, "I more than anyone else know what is right for me; trust myself to make the decisions that are right for me and I will." Another former student, Wendy Miorana, also chose to attend Sudbury Valley as a teenager. Though she explained that she was always an independent person, one of the things she appreciated at Sudbury Valley was that "You are in control of your education."

Individuals at Fairhaven School in the United States are in control of their education as well. A documentary titled *Voices from the New American Schoolhouse* (Mydlack, 2004) gives students at this school an opportunity to share their perspectives. Excerpts from three unnamed students follow:

> [In a traditional school] you have one person in the front telling all the other people who aren't in the front what to think and what to understand and how to think about things and I don't think that really works in terms of teaching eloquence and teaching real knowledge…. I talk to people. Everybody has their own nuggets of knowledge they have because they were interested...whatever they might be.
>
> It doesn't matter how old you are. It just depends whether or not you're ready to take in the information.
>
> I don't think the actual act of teaching is what's poison. I think the actual act of forcing it upon someone….if your heart isn't in what you do you'll never learn it.

These students connect with and are engaged in their learning, unlike those who choose to leave school early.

Matt Hern (2008) has assembled a collection of writings about alternatives to the traditional education system. As well as including articles from educators like John Taylor Gatto, John Holt, Ivan Illich and Chris Mercogliano, Hern's book includes the perspective of young friends:

> youth voices – kids who have deschooled themselves; who have spent some or all of their childhoods not going to school; have attended alternative schools and/or are attending democratic schools – kids who are doing something different. (p. 21)

All of the students he interviewed are from Vancouver and have at one time or another attended Windsor House, though their "backgrounds, approaches, and experiences are fairly diverse" (p. 21).

Hern (2008) asked these individuals, aged nine to twenty-three, some specific questions regarding alternatives to traditional schools and their experiences with alternatives. The students spoke about freedom and choice, learning to believe in and trust themselves, and appreciating the opportunity to direct their learning and be themselves. I include the following information from two student interviews.

David Gagnon reported that by the time he was in a mainstream Grade 3 class, he "was ready to curl up and die" (p. 23). He did not elaborate on the experience, but shared what happened when he started "homeschooling":

> Besides watching TV, fighting with my sister, and building with my Lego, I wasn't outwardly doing anything. I was, however, inwardly reorganizing myself. I started to enjoy language, building my vocabulary simply for the sake of being able to use it (this was in part an "I'm not dumb cause I

> don't go to school" response); I became vegetarian when I started thinking about animal rights; and, most importantly, I started feeling stronger about who I was. (p. 23)

Gagnon tried an alternative school and then went back to homeschooling. At one point he visited Windsor House where he finally felt at home.

Hern (2008) also shares reflections from Genevieve Robertson who enjoyed the majority of her school years at Windsor House. However, thinking that she would be more academically stimulated at another school, Robertson decided to leave Windsor House and attend a high school that offered "curriculum-based courses." Unfamiliar with the fast-paced achievement-oriented system, when she pushed herself to succeed she became stressed, withdrawn and unhappy. She explains the following:

> I worked so hard without much discretion between what I actually liked and what I didn't actually care about. I think at the time I thought I was just an avid learner and everyone else had lost their love for learning. Perhaps this is a small bit true, but I think it was more about the fact that I had not learned to play the required game…. I think that my true love for learning was getting hidden away somewhere and replaced by these meaningless, short-lived feelings of accomplishment after writing a test or an essay. The relief comes when you realize you can forget everything you just learned. (p. 67)

Gagnon and Robertson, as well as other individuals interviewed by Hern, have appreciated the freedom to choose their own paths to learning and success.

There are other youth who spend little or no time in any type of formal school. Grace Llewellyn (2005) edited a collection of essays from 11 homeschoolers or unschoolers. Llewellyn states that although these teenagers are all self-directed, they are in fact different in the way they organize their time and learning: "Some hold themselves to a fairly regular academic schedule complete with at least one or two textbooks; others rarely, if ever, deliberately study *anything*" (p. 21, emphasis in original). One of the contributors, 16-year-old Patrick Meehan, explains his own path to learning:

> Admittedly, "homeschooler" is a misnomer. I haven't the faintest idea who coined it, but the word "home" suggests something inferior, primitive, "homemade."…. Perhaps "independently educated" would be more accurate, because after all, the way I have chosen is not a "school" concept at all – at home or otherwise. For that matter, I don't necessarily learn at home. I learn everywhere. I even go back into a physical building when I see fit. (p. 182)

Another contributor to the book was Erin Roberts. Fifteen when she wrote her essay, she explains that she spent the majority of her school years being homeschooled. She learned at a young age that her interests guide her learning. Roberts reflects upon what she learned as a result of her passion for and work with horses:

> I'll bet you are thinking, "But how can she learn anything by doing that?" Well, it all depends on what one wants to learn. *You* might not know the difference between a snaffle and a hackamore and might not care either, but you probably have a strong interest in something – maybe dogs, cats, crafts, reading books, or whatever – that you could learn a lot from. Mine is horses. I manage to cover most school subjects by doing work concerned with horses or two of my other main interests, 4-H and soccer. (p. 27)

Roberts enjoys and appreciates the freedom and trust offered to her by her parents. She said "Most of the limits and goals I have, I set for myself. I enjoy setting challenges, then striving to meet them" (p. 25).

In this discussion centred on student voices, I have highlighted that children can learn important things from non-traditional learning environments, including no set curriculum. Of course, this type of education does not ensure that children will learn what adults think is important to learn at an appropriate time. However, I would argue that a traditional education cannot make the same assurances either. As suggested by their experiences, children who are offered freedom are developing independence, the love of learning and the ability to think for themselves. I believe that these skills are much more valuable and desirable than whether or not a child learns to spell a certain word in a certain grade for it is through these skills that an individual can learn the other when the need arises.

Thus far, I have focussed on key aspects of alternatives that may be considered by some as radical. That is, extreme in nature and much too far removed from the mainstream. There are other components to alternative approaches that are valuable as well and a look at some of these makes clear that not every aspect of alternative schools needs to appear radical. In fact, some of these examples may require only minor adjustments to traditional beliefs and practices.

Teaching and Learning

Cunningham (2007), who uncovered similar themes of control, freedom and accountability, argues that though there are individual teachers enacting progressive practices within their classrooms, policy makers must also be willing to look at education and schooling differently. When policies and practices are unchanged, the needs of all individuals are not met, and as a result, individuals create alternatives. Many of the educators and researchers discussed in this literature review have radical views about teaching and learning. It is these radical views that may appeal to those for whom the system is not working. These practices may not in fact be all that radical.

In this section I begin with a brief discussion of self-directed learning and how this may look in traditional and alternative schools. I intend to show that, while self-directed learning is possible in mainstream schools, there may be external pressures that impact upon how it is implemented. Following that is a description of the importance of considering children as valued citizens in their own education. Those who adopt alternative philosophies acknowledge this value; as well, so may individuals in the mainstream system. Finally, the importance of community is explored. In particular, I address authentic involvement in terms of organization and environment, and knowledge and curriculum, and raise questions for the conventional system.

Self-directed learning

Though not technically a definition of self-directed learning, Mercogliano (1998) offers the following:

> The majority of practitioners in all of the varied alternatives to conventional schooling – homeschoolers very much included – operate according to a model of learning that, above all honours the personhood of the learner. It reviles against coercion and respects the right of the learner to codetermine the conditions under which he or she will engage in the process. It holds volition and choice paramount. It maintains a bedrock faith in every child's inborn desire to learn and grow, to become knowledgeable, effective, and competent. And finally, it recognizes the validity of independent learning and self-teaching, where teacher and learner simply occupy the same being. (p.119)

This understanding of learning provides us with a clear perspective of alternative-minded individuals. It is this philosophy upon which alternatives are founded, and thus it is important to acknowledge. Though not necessarily alternative, there are other more

technical definitions of self-directed learning which are important to consider as well so as to a gain a broader understanding of this phenomenon.

Sandra Kerka (1994) and Lorys Oddi (1987) discuss the plethora of studies regarding the process and nature of self-directed learning (SDL). The purpose of this research project is not necessarily to understand this process, but rather to understand the experiences as a result of SDL. Nonetheless, as participants in this study engage in SDL activities, I briefly review the topic in this section.

What is SDL? After a thorough search of relevant literature, Oddi (1987) observes that, "Definitions of SDL in the literature are frequently confusing, overlapping in some respects and differing subtly in others" (p. 21). Oddi notes that varying terminology is one reason for this confusion, but mainly differing perspectives account for the ambiguity. The dominant perspective "views self-directed learning as a process; a less dominant perspective emphasizes personality characteristics" (p. 22). Oddi concludes that investigating the relationship between the two is key to understanding SDL.

Kerka (1994) also reviewed literature concerning SDL and dispels myths about it. Of particular interest, she suggests that SDL skills run along a continuum, rather than SDL being an all-or-nothing skill. This is important to consider in understanding individual differences and how to promote SDL. Kerka explains that

> it may be fairer to say that SDL is a lifelong phenomenon in which adults differ from other adults and from children in degree: some people are or are not self-directed learners; some people are or are not in different situations. (p. 3)

Kerka further states that some individuals view SDL as "a learner-controlled instructional process that would seem incompatible with formal educational settings," but that researchers such as Brookfield (1986) and Garrison (1992) view SDL "as a personal attribute instead of a set of instructional techniques, characterized by the internal change in consciousness that results from critical reflection upon the learning process" (p. 3). Kerka suggests that while SDL may be considered along a continuum, it is important to remember that, "The learner is neither independent or dependent, but interdependent, forming new understanding through dialogue, feedback, and reflection with fellow learners and facilitators" (p. 4). Clearly, the concept of SDL is complex, but possible to promote. Does this mean then, that all individuals can learn to be self-directed?

An edited resource book for small rural schools examines the importance of SDL in multi-grade classrooms (Vincent, 1999). The authors suggest three strategies to nurture self-direction and efficacy: providing opportunities to make independent decisions and solve problems; processing information effectively and enhancing self-confidence; and encouraging student self-reflection regarding learning. Susan Vincent (1999) reports that the authors feel that "a touchstone of effective learning is that students are in charge of their own learning; essentially, they direct their own learning processes" (p. 1). However, "This does not mean students make all the decisions, and it does not mean reverting to the curriculum of 'personal relevance' of the '60s or the 'child-centred curriculum' of years ago" (p. 1).

These understandings of learning connect to modern-day education in Ontario. The introductory pages of *The Kindergarten Program* (MEO, 2006b) make reference to a child's natural curiosity and the importance of teaching through the inquiry model:

> Most children are naturally curious about their surroundings. They have an interest in exploring and investigating to see how things work and why things happen. Children have an innate sense of wonder and awe and a natural desire for inquiry. Kindergarten programs can capitalize on children's natural curiosity and their desire to make sense of their environment. (p. 9)

This acknowledgement about curiosity is key and gives teachers permission to allow opportunities for self-directed learning. Independent learning and freedom are also suggested for other grades. For example, *A Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Grades 4 to 6: Volume 1* (MEO, 2006d), recommends independent projects as an important strategy "for both struggling learners and those needing to enhance the depth and breadth of their learning. Because they give students the freedom to choose, independent projects can be a strong motivator" (p. 131). *A Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Grades 4 to 6: Volume 6* (MEO, 2008b) suggests the importance of independent or free writing time: "Be sure to balance genre studies with other kinds of writing. Students need time each week to express personal thoughts in writing and to record events in their life. They need time to write for their own purposes" (p. 85).

Unfortunately, the pressures to "get through it all" may seem to take precedence over providing independent learning opportunities. Further, trusting that children will capitalize on their own curiosity may be overshadowed. For example, the Kindergarten

document quoted above continues with the following: "However, curiosity on its own is not enough. The guidance of a thoughtful teacher is essential to enable children to learn through inquiry." These additional comments seem to suggest that all children will need this focused direction. Is this true or does this connect to Gatto's (2005) thoughts about *Intellectual Dependency*? The alternative perspectives and experiences explored in this literature review suggest that all children do not necessarily need this direction and control. Alternative-minded individuals believe that it is important, beginning in the early years, that we offer children at least some freedom.

There is obviously much to consider and reflect upon with regard to self-directed learning and teaching. Keep in mind one final suggestion from the aforementioned resource book (Vincent, 1999). Fostering SDL "requires more than just shifting to a different instructional approach. *Self-directed learning demands a fresh look at assumptions about the learner, learning, self-motivation, and the classroom environment*" (p. 2, emphasis added). This shift in assumptions is perhaps one of the foundational elements throughout this work. Perhaps part of this shift rests on one's consideration of children as valued participants not only in their own learning, but in society, too. The following subsection supports an argument for this and shows how some educators and researchers utilize this lens.

Children as valued citizens

> In 1989, world leaders decided that children needed a special convention just for them because people under 18 years old often need special care and protection that adults do not. The leaders also wanted to make sure that the world recognized that children have human rights too….
>
> The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Every right spelled out in the Convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care; education; and legal, civil and social services (UNICEF, n.d., *Convention on the rights of the child,* para. 3-4)

The research of Henry Maitles and Ross Deuchar (2006) is based upon these Human Rights for Children and clearly demonstrates that these rights honour children as valuable citizens, worthy of having their voices heard. In their study, Maitles and Deuchar present case studies focused on one of three key elements of active and

responsible citizenship in primary schools in Scotland: purposeful student councils; participatory, democratic classroom culture; and involving students in meaningful discussions around controversial social and political issues (p. 252). In a case study concerning pupil councils, students and adults worked together collaboratively to develop shared values and a school code of conduct. During student-led school meetings, which included children aged five to eleven, students took on much of the ownership of the decision-making. "Although the pupils often appeared to take the lead in discussions, teacher-leaders also made suggestions and on rare occasions blocked pupil ideas on grounds of health and safety" (p. 254). It seems that, generally, students and teachers were pleased with the results of the system, though there was some concern among students that more students should have been involved with the pupil council so that everyone would have a chance to voice their thoughts. As well, it appeared that not all teachers were fully committed to the process of listening to student voices.

Maitles and Deuchar (2006) consider education from the child's perspective:

> The implementation and impact of education for citizenship initiatives depends on whether one sees the glass as half full or half empty. …there is excellent work going on to develop young people's interest, knowledge, skills and dispositions in areas of citizenship and democracy; yet it is rare to find examples of genuine democracy based on children's human rights. It is a matter of hearts and minds. (p. 263)

It is becoming clear that in order for individuals to accept students as capable, they must not only be willing to learn about alternatives, they must also have an open heart and be willing to examine personal beliefs.

As mentioned above, education for citizenship is another common feature in democratic schools. In Ross Deuchar's (2008) research children in Scottish primary schools had the opportunity to "describe their personal concerns about local, national and global issues and to consider the way in which these concerns related to their own social values" (p. 22). Through observation, semi-structured discussions, and pre- and post-questionnaires, Deuchar concludes the following:

> Through exploring their personal values in relation to controversial social issues and reflecting on their ideas for enterprising responses to these issues, the case study pupils were beginning to see the potential they had for drawing upon their own creativity and making informed decisions about ideas for social change. (p. 29)

Deuchar recommends that, "the time has come for teachers to embrace democratic values and to listen to children in a more relaxed, pupil-driven environment which is conducive to contemporary, meaningful learning" (p. 30). Within this recommendation is that curriculum needs to provide for children "genuine opportunities to see their own potential for participating, taking action and unleashing their creativity and enterprise at a local, national and global level" (p. 30).

Shallcross, Robinson, Pace, and Tamoutseli (2007) discuss the involvement of children in curriculum as well. Educators who are concerned with democratic education and accountability would be interested in their findings. Their research in European primary schools suggests "whole school development necessitates a change from top-down curriculum planning to the active participation of pupils in negotiating the content and nature of their own learning and the environments in which this learning occurs" (p. 75). Through their research on the power of student voice in environmental education, they conclude that "motivated teachers and schools can find ways of implementing new teaching approaches and establishing connections with their local community that promote social agency" (p. 84).

While the schools in these studies are not necessarily alternative, it is clear that those involved in the studies have, at least to some extent, made a paradigm shift in their thinking about education, learning and children. That is, they see the value of children's voice, ownership in the learning and collaboration. Those for whom the mainstream system is not working seek out such experiences for their children, experiences where they are connected to and with the learning, the curriculum and the community. It is this inclusion of the community to which the discussion turns next.

Community involvement

In traditional schools, children and parents may be left out of important decision-making. The *Early School Leavers Report* (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005) recommends that education systems become proactive and develop local curriculum, and it stresses the importance of communication between and among parents, educators and students. I recognize that some mainstream schools may work hard to include the community voice; however, where the community voice remains unheard,

this may be one of the reasons alternatives are chosen. Thus it is important to include this discussion of community.

Various researchers discuss the importance of involving community members in schools. Gandin and Apple (2002) report that educators "need to find ways of connecting [their] educational efforts to local communities especially to those members of these communities with less power" (p. 260). Gandin and Apple worked with the Citizen School in Brazil. Prior to the Citizen School, all schools and educational programs in Brazil were centralized, leaving little or no room for autonomy. Since connecting with the community and working with teachers, parents and students, the Citizen School now boasts that there are more students passing Grade 1 on the first attempt and fewer who leave by Grade 4. This school community now directly influences four key areas: management, curriculum, principles for living together and evaluation (p. 264). I do not claim that the nature of the Citizen School is similar to the alternatives that I suggest; however, it is important to note that all of these areas were influenced through dialogue, highlighting "a new form of thinking not only about education, but also about the whole society" (p. 271). Such localized changes in Ontario would give both students and parents a voice.

Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) describe the importance of making authentic connections with the community as well. In their work with "working-class Mexican communities" (p. 132), they refer to using "funds of knowledge" as a way to connect homes and schools. In their study, curriculum units were designed around community knowledge, with parents and community members as expert teachers. They claim that "by capitalizing on household and other community resources, [educators] can organize classroom instruction that far exceeds in quality the rote-like instruction these children commonly encounter in schools" (p. 132).

These examples stress the importance of connecting and working with families and the community. When schools are at odds with parents, education becomes "us" against "them." This type of environment becomes toxic for all. Greenburg (1995) discusses parental involvement:

> Parents are a nuisance for most [mainstream] schools. They complain, criticize, take up time, and worst of all, they interfere in their children's education.
>
> At Sudbury Valley, parents have been an integral part of the picture from the beginning. We felt that, to succeed, we had to have the full cooperation of the students' families. To begin with, education is the primary responsibility of parents. They bring children into the world, and it is their sacred duty to rear them to the point of independence. Schools exist to help parents in this task, not to exclude them from it. At least that's the way it is supposed to be in this country, where individual freedom is protected. (p. 160)

Is this type of collaboration and support what parents look for when choosing alternatives? What if parents are unable to be involved? Can mainstream schools maintain a similar emphasis on community involvement? Is authentic involvement in terms of organization and environment, and knowledge and curriculum possible with a thrust on accountability and achievement?

This discussion of self-directed learning, citizenship and community help us understand important features that support student learning, in the mainstream and alternatives. Of prime importance is that children are valued as are parents, school staff members and community members. This may also be the case within the conventional system as well. However, while there are progressive individuals within this system, there are external pressures upon educators and system-wide change requires rethinking policy at the top level (Cunningham, 2007). Alternatives provide this system-wide change by rethinking the paternalistic nature of the curriculum and pedagogy, and supporting individual growth through freedom and choice.

Summary

In the literature review, I have documented and discussed many issues pertinent to the current research study: historical, political and social influences and concerns; the educational debate in Ontario; key elements of alternative schools and youth perspectives; self-directed learning; community; and the importance of honouring the voices of children. Several themes emerge from this review: First, children can indeed be trusted to make decisions about their education and learning within a supportive atmosphere of freedom and choice. Second, we learn that not everyone values

system-wide accountability measures and that individuals are capable of determining their own success. Third, the definitions of education and learning continue to change and evolve to become more inclusive of the value of children, parents and the community. And finally, providing such an environment depends on how willing and able adults are to challenge the status quo and/or involve themselves in the alternative movement.

These themes help us understand and investigate the underlying problem to be addressed in the study. In particular, this examination sets the context for a more thorough investigation of student experiences and adult perceptions in an alternative school, and influences upon these. An introduction to relevant educational thought, and the more recent history of schooling in Ontario help us to understand the perspective of those who choose alternatives, and we gain a picture of how adult choices and experiences impact children.

Beliefs and practices surrounding traditional education are part of the mainstream. Even those with alternative views continue to be influenced, consciously or not, by the prevailing discourse. By listening to reflective voices within their communities, alternative schools may gain insights that help them understand their population while operating within the influences of the traditional system. This discourse not only draws attention to the importance of taking into account alternative perspectives when considering the education of all children in Ontario, but also supports the need to do so.

The evolution of education is not without conflict, and I doubt that it ever will be. However, the themes explored in this literature review suggest a growing need for educators to understand learning through the eyes of children and to consider the perspectives of those children when designing schools, developing curriculum and setting expectations. The present study seeks to do just that, to understand learning from the student point of view, and in the following section I discuss the significance of this study in light of the existing literature.

Significance

When I first began searching for research about alternative schooling, I did not find much relevant information, especially related to Ontario alternatives. I had been focussed solely on mainstream university-based studies. Not surprisingly, when I stepped

outside of this traditional perspective, I was able to find much information. With this in mind, I briefly outline the traditional and non-traditional literature related to this study.

Many individuals have written articles and books related to free schooling, unschooling and alternative or radical education (for example, Illich, 1971; Kozol, 1982; Mercogliano, 1998; Neill, 1960/1992). These authors present their own views and/or stories about children's experiences in alternative or free schools. The Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) website (2009) provides a variety of information on alternative education, including print and video material, as well as links to various other websites. In fact, when I contacted Isaac Graves of AERO to see if he knew of any research highlighting student perspectives, he suggested two books: *Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader* (Hern, 2008) and *Real Lives: eleven teenagers who don't go to school tell their stories* (Llewellyn, 2005). As well, articles and videos about alternative education are available on the websites of alternative schools, such as Sudbury Valley (n.d.), The Free School (n.d.) and Windsor House School (n.d.).

A recent search of the ERIC database for self-directed learning resulted in over 1000 works. However, the majority of these concerned high schools, colleges and universities, gifted students and teacher education. One study of note presented a retrospective analysis of an American publicly funded alternative school's journey to remain committed to the principles of open education (Dunn, 1998) but this included only teacher voices and researcher observations. Dunn reviewed the research of other researchers such as Foley (1983), Smith, Burke and Barr (1976) and Raywid (1994), highlighting their work in identifying characteristics of successful alternative schools.

A narrower search of self-directed learning and children resulted in 76 published works; the majority of these concerned older students and adults, gifted students, and the use of technology. Though mainly focussed on the process of self-directed learning, rather than the experiences, a number of sources provided some insight into the topic (Kerka, 1994; Oddi, 1987; Vincent, 1999). Several studies discuss democratic alternative schools, which often include a component of self-directed learning (Deuchar, 2008; Dunn, 1998; Maitles & Deuchar, 2006). However, it appears that the research on elementary student experiences in Canada is limited. Searches of three databases

(Education: Abstracts @ Scholars Portal: Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection and ERIC) undertaken between July 2008 and June 2009 yielded one study of an alternative public school in British Columbia (Wasserman, 2007). While this study discusses individual success and achievement, it lacks the student perspective.

An Internet search for alternative schools in Ontario led me to the Ontario Federation of Independent Schools (OFIS) website. According to this site, there is a wide range of independent schools in the province of Ontario (OFIS, n.d., *Member schools: Schools across Ontario*). These include a variety of types of schools from Montessori and Nursery Schools to Preparatory Academies and schools for children with special needs. Not all of these schools meet my previous definition of alternative as they merely provide different atmospheres for the same mainstream education.

One school in Toronto, ALPHA Alternative School, encompasses the "values of child-centred, cooperative, democratic, community-driven, open, arts-infused, and social justice oriented education" (ALPHA, 2005, *About ALPHA: Philosophy*, para. 1). Ryan Slashinsky (2006) investigated the ideas of community and involvement at ALPHA, and the school's role in society from the perspective of adult community members. While a valid contribution to the body of knowledge about alternative schools, the scope of Slashinsky's study did not include the voices of students.

In July 2009, I searched the Internet yet again and was rewarded with a link to the work of Dr. Carlo Ricci. Ricci, a professor at Nipissing University, has written many articles and made numerous audio and visual contributions to the world of alternatives, in particular ideas about unschooling. Several of his pieces include the perspectives of children, including his perceptions about his daughters' experiences (Ricci, 2007a, 2008, 2009). When I contacted him to see if he knew of any sources that included the child's perspective, he suggested the two books recommended by Isaac Graves of AERO.

Carlo Ricci and Kristin Simpson (2008) collaborated to write about Simpson's experiences starting The Beach School in Toronto, Ontario. Simpson explains the importance of having the community discuss concepts like *freedom*, *responsibility* and *trust* (p. 14). Again, while providing valuable information for educators and parents, their paper does not provide a focus from the student perspective.

Though I did find some information about alternative education from mainstream sources, it is not surprising to me, given the nature of my project that I had to search alternative sources. The present research adds to the growing body of evidence surrounding alternatives to mainstream education, traditional schooling and forced learning. In fact, along with Slashinsky (2006) a number of other graduate students have recently added to this body of evidence. Sandra Stewart (2006) argued for the rethinking of education to include the radical perspective. Heather Cunningham (2007) investigated progressive ideology in the Nova Scotia educational system and included the voices of public and alternative school teachers, Faculty of Education professors, pre-service education students and high school students.

The present thesis contributes to the limited numbers of studies or articles giving voice to the elementary student perspective. In this research project children and their parents were offered a chance to have their voices heard, of recording their thoughts and beliefs about learning. Free schools such as Sudbury Valley, Albany Free School and Summerhill are founded upon trust (Greenburg, Sadofsky & Lempka, 2005; Mercogliano, 1998; Neill, 1960/1992). It is noteworthy to mention that these schools may not need this external validation for themselves. However, the various studies and books about these schools share with others a sort of "proof" that this trust is valid. I offered participants in this study an opportunity to be part of a larger social action that seeks to listen to students and parents and consider alternatives.

With research that examines student experiences, Parkway Alternative and the School Board will have information that may provide evidence for the efficacy of an alternative model. Along with direct benefits to the school and Board, this research study has the potential to inform educational policy initiatives such as including self-directed learning alternatives at the elementary level.

Next, *Chapter II* includes a review of the methods and methodology. In the chapter, I explain the importance and limitations of the present research design in light of its significance to educational research.

CHAPTER II
RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter, I explore how this research study was designed and implemented. First, I review the method undertaken and describe the participants. After that, I examine the study's limitations and explain how I conducted the interviews. Finally, I explain my experiences as I worked through analyzing the data.

Method

Traditionally, we undertake scientific research to investigate problems or issues. In this particular case, qualitative research is the most appropriate lens because it "begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Phenomenology focuses on "what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 58). This phenomenological study "describes the meaning for several individuals of their **lived experiences** of a concept or phenomenon" (p. 57, emphasis in original), that is, the lived experiences of children in an alternative school setting from their point of view and through the perceptions of parents. After collecting data through semi-structured interviews with children and parents, I considered "the essence of the experience for all of the individuals" (p. 58). A phenomenological approach is valuable "because of its perceived capacity to process authentically the subjective and the value-laden from a small, purposeful, non-representative sampling" (Bednall, 2006, *Designing a phenomenological study…*, para. 4). As such, it is the best way to begin to understand the experience of individuals in an alternative school setting. As John Creswell (2007) suggests, it is important to understand experiences "in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon" (p. 60).

The research design consists of interviews with students and parents at a publicly funded alternative school in Ontario. The school, Parkway Alternative, has been operating for over 35 years, is situated in a diverse downtown neighbourhood in a large metropolis and serves approximately 70 children ranging from Junior Kindergarten to

Grade 6. This school has a strong sense of community in which parents and other volunteers routinely use their skills and interests to provide opportunities for children. I have purposefully chosen this site (Creswell, 2007) for several reasons. First, students are given the opportunity to direct their learning and I wanted to investigate their experiences related to this phenomenon. Second, the school is publicly funded and compared to private alternatives it may be more accessible to a wider range of individuals.

In the beginning, I met with the small staff to explain my research and interest in working with the school. Though this group of individuals had no decision-making authority, in this preliminary meeting the teachers agreed that this research seemed interesting and worthwhile enough to present to their community. After receiving ethical approval from Lakehead University and the School Board, I attended an after-school Parent Meeting in April 2009 where the parents and staff discuss issues and make decisions about the school.

At this parent meeting, I gave a brief description of myself and the research project, explaining that neither the participants nor the school or School Board would be identified by name in any reporting of the results. After a short discussion, this group granted permission for me to approach the community. As a result, through their electronic communications network, my letter of intent was posted and community members were invited to contact me. This letter of intent outlined the research project, including the fact that participation would be voluntary and stated that participants would have the right to refuse to answer a question, stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time.

Initially two parents contacted me. The first agreed to participate, along with her son. The second parent also indicated her interest in participating, and later asked her daughter who agreed to participate as well. In an attempt to solicit more volunteers for the study, I made a second electronic request to the school. As well, I attended another Parent Meeting where I met and briefly talked with about 10 parents. As a result, another parent, who indicated her family's interest in participating in the study, contacted me.

Participants

Between May and July, 2009, I conducted six interviews with seven participants: one girl aged 10; her mom; a 13 year old boy; his mom; one 10 year old girl; and her mom and dad. Though I did not ask specific demographics about these families, I did learn that each of the adults has a university education.

Semi-structured interviews lasted between 10 and 45 minutes each and were conducted at mutually agreed upon times and places, such as at the school or a nearby coffee shop. In one case, interviews were conducted in the family home. All interviews with children were completed in the presence of one or both of their parents. Not wanting to limit participation, the study was set up so that it was possible, but not mandatory, that I would interview both a child and his or her parent or parents. In fact the participant group consisted entirely of such pairings. In the end, this provided a richer understanding of individual student experiences, allowing for a more in-depth analysis.

Two of the students are currently attending the school. One of these children has been at the school since Kindergarten and the other has been there for three years, attending a mainstream school prior to that. The third student attended the school from Kindergarten to Grade 6 and had graduated from the school two years earlier.

Creswell (2007) discusses the importance of ethical considerations regarding "maintaining confidentiality, and protecting the anonymity of individuals with whom we speak" (p. 44). Similar to Slashinsky (2006), because both the sample size and the school community are as small as they are, in order to maintain participant anonymity I have purposely chosen not to use pseudonyms. Though pseudonyms are traditionally used in qualitative studies, I remain concerned that such use might identify participants. This belief is similar to Cunningham's (2007), who states that "in order to allow full and complete confidentiality to these [student] participants, voices will not be specified by a pseudonym" (p. 67). Though this decision breaks from tradition, I believe that it is necessary if we are to continue to engage individuals within small alternative communities in relevant, purposeful conversations.

Further, unless it was pertinent to understanding and anonymity could still be maintained, I have been purposefully vague in identifying which child or parent made a particular comment. However, I have generally represented all of the interviewees, and in

choosing specific quotations to include, I considered clarity and relevance, and tried to ensure that all points of view were heard. The process I used is described in detail later in this chapter. Finally, though I interviewed a mom and dad together, I have considered them as separate participants as they had individual stories to tell; however, where one's remarks merely supported, clarified or enhanced the other's, I have indicated that. In other words, when I indicate that "two" or "three" parents said something, this does not include both members of the couple, unless specifically stated.

A small-scale study, the sample group consisted of seven individuals – three children and four adults. Creswell (2007) has documented sample size ranging from 1 to 352, but points out that "Dukes (1984) recommends studying 3 to 10 subjects, and… Rieman (1986) studied 10 individuals" (p. 126). This study's sample size of seven highlights individual experiences in this community, and is sufficient for a beginning understanding of important aspects of the experiences of and influences on students.

Limitations

A small-scale study, it is important to note the limitations of the findings. First, though the study was open to all community members, through the interviews, it became clear that all of the parent respondents have attended university and are interested in their children's education. This finding suggests a potential bias in the study sample. Clearly, the findings are not representative of every individual at the school, nor can they necessarily be generalized to individuals in other alternatives or the mainstream educational system. However, the emergence of common themes provides information that may be useful not only to the school community but also allows for those interested in considering possibilities for the School Board and the Ontario educational system as a whole. As well, this formative work has the potential to influence further research in this area.

Secondly, I did not spend time observing students at Parkway Alternative. As a result of this limitation, it was difficult to formulate a thorough understanding of student experiences. Though parents were able to provide a deeper perspective, students sometimes had difficulty remembering or articulating their experiences. Part of this difficulty is perhaps related to my expectations. In retrospect, I expected students to

easily be able to talk about their experiences through open-ended questions. The ability to do so seemed somewhat difficult for the student participants. Though I have much experience working with children, perhaps this difficulty was due in part to my limited experience with research, or even the questions themselves. Interestingly enough, at the initial Parent Meeting, one of the parents suggested that it might be better for me to observe in classrooms and talk with students while they were involved in daily activities. I had in fact initially considered this possibility; however, I work full time and live about an hour away from the school. The time commitment necessary to observe in the school seemed too large. In retrospect, this additional source of information may have provided a deeper understanding of student experiences and is perhaps a possibility for a future study.

Another limitation is that in not being extremely familiar with the school and its community, I sometimes used interview time to learn more about the general workings of the school, rather than individual experiences related to the school structure. Perhaps, as Slashinksy (2006) reported, one needs to be part of a community in order to fully understand it. Nonetheless, the results reported in this work have provided a broad understanding of the perceptions of experiences at the school. In fact, this perspective may be one of the reasons that I learned about influences upon individuals, along with their actual experiences.

The Interview Process

In developing the methodology for this study, I referred to Clive Opie's (2004) work concerning questionnaires and interviews. Appendices 1 and 2 detail the initial questions that I asked children and parents. Rather than asking questions specific to the themes – such as freedom – that emerged in the literature review, I began with broad, open-ended questions, such as "Tell me about your experience as a student at this school" and "Tell me about your perceptions of your child's experience as a student at this school." In order to understand more fully the experiences of participants, open-ended questions such as these allow for "free response and [that] no preconceived replies are imposed by the researcher" (p. 106). Not directing participant thinking in this way allowed the participants the opportunity to speak about whatever was important to them and their

experiences. Further, using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions provided all participants with a common beginning point and allowed them to "develop their own ideas, feelings, insights, expectations or attitudes" (p. 111).

On the other hand, some questions were specifically related to the literature review. For example, I asked students and parents about success and their involvement in the school. This type of questioning supported a deeper understanding of participant experiences, thoughts and feelings with a particular focus on key ideas in the literature review. Participant comments in turn support the idea that traditional schooling does not meet the needs of all individuals and thus alternatives to the mainstream are not only necessary, but valuable as well.

Children were interviewed in the presence of one or both parents. There is the concern that young participants might not be wholly honest in front of parents or that parents might answer for their children. I have no indication to believe that parents influenced student responses; in fact, in one case when the child looked to the parent for confirmation, the parent indicated that she needed to answer for herself. Generally parents involved themselves in student interviews only once or twice, and these interruptions were merely to clarify comments or questions; however, near the end of one interview, the parent prompted the child by suggesting various experiences to share.

In two of the interviews with parents, their children were not present and I believe that parents felt comfortable talking openly with me about their children's experiences, their own perceptions, and the school itself. For part of the interview with the participant couple, their child was present, though it did not seem to be a problem. Her presence proved somewhat humorous in fact as she occasionally corrected her parents' memories!

Throughout the interviews, I took notes as participants answered questions. Along with note taking, I audio recorded interviews, as suggested by Creswell (2007) for ease of transcription. Creswell does not specifically discuss research with children though he does favour having participants review transcripts to ensure accuracy. Other researchers with explicit experience with children have varying opinions about and experiences with interviews and transcript review. For example, in a math study, researchers did not audio record interviews, but had children aged five read their transcripts for verification (Sherley, Clark & Higgins, 2008). In another phenomenological study regarding

ice-skating, Tatiana Ryba (2007) interviewed children aged eight to ten and used all of the interview information to develop a description of a fictitious skater. In that study, participants did not review their individual interviews, but reviewed the composite to see if it represented their experiences. As well, participants in Ryba's study selected pseudonyms.

Because the present research focuses on individual experiences, I decided that I would not create a fictitious student. I did, however, e-mail the transcripts to the parents and offered them and their children the opportunity to review the transcripts for clarification or revision. One parent e-mailed back the transcripts with minor word changes, such as names, and clarifications about inaudible comments. This parent and child also answered some follow-up questions related to their interviews. The other parents had no revisions to make to transcripts.

One of the parents e-mailed that she would be happy to review my findings and analysis. Member checking is one way to validate findings (Creswell, 2008), and thus I offered the same opportunity to the other parent participants, all of whom indicated an interest. As the full report is rather lengthy, I e-mailed a brief summary of my findings and discussion. One adult participant responded with the following: "So interesting, and I certainly could do a whole new interview just in response! Seems right on track to me." I was pleased to know that my analysis seemed accurate based upon such a brief synopsis. Another interview in response may have provided insight into some of the questions that have arisen. I do not know if student participants reviewed my report summary, and if they did, their thoughts.

In interviews, I asked for specific demographic information concerning participants' experience, such as their age and number of years at the school. I did not look for specific cultural information and it was not my intention to explicitly request information regarding culture, race, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or socio-economics. Any such information that was volunteered is reported in the findings only if it was useful to understand the data and did not compromise participant anonymity. For example, though I did not explicitly ask questions regarding home environment or personal lifestyle, early literacy activities in the home may impact the learning that happens at school (Jordan, Snow & Porche, 2000). There are potentially

many other factors that affect one's educational experiences; these might be profitably investigated in depth in another study.

One final word about the research design: Lisa Goldstein (2000) writes that her friendship with the subject of her study interfered with reporting the truth. My relationship with the school community is very limited. As such, I believe that I was able to report my findings without fear of damaging relationships. However, as this study is about a real-life school and personal situations, I was concerned that it might cause some stress for participants and/or the community. In the reporting of this research I believe that I have upheld the integrity of this institution and its long service to children and learning. I have not hidden negative outcomes that are pertinent to understanding the phenomenon; rather, I have reported such results in a constructive way. That is, I have attempted to be at all times non-judgmental and non-threatening. With this thinking in mind, there were some influences upon my data analysis, and I turn next to this brief discussion.

Data Analysis

As Alan Peshkin (2000) advises, I acknowledged the perspective from which I conducted this research. However, I still needed to remain fair as I worked my way through the project, not only in how I asked questions, but also in what I *heard* in the answers so that I was in fact listening to what participants intended to say rather than interpreting their comments to reinforce my own preconceived notions. Also, at first I thought I needed to be, and tried to be, a passive interviewer so as not to influence participants; yet, I felt drawn to engage in conversation with the participants, as some of their comments spoke so closely to my heart and I could see many links to the literature I had reviewed. It was, in fact, difficult to stay fully uninvolved, though I have no reason to believe that I influenced participant responses. My involvement consisted of nods, smiles and the occasional reference to my own thoughts about education.

As well, it was important that I not enter the project with preconceived notions about the school. Unfortunately, my expectations about self-directed learning confused my initial understanding and analysis. I had expected students to have more freedom related to their learning and was puzzled by comments that indicated otherwise. This

confusion around self-directed learning will be noted in the *Findings and Discussion* chapter.

Peshkin (2000) also states that qualitative research is a "journey of interpretation" (p. 5). Since we come to our interpretations with everything we already know, believe and understand about a situation, topic or subject, as I analyzed interviews, I knew that I must be cognizant of my interpretations. Even then, it is only *my* interpretation that I know. Though not a simple task, I have endeavoured to maintain objectivity by constantly returning to the data, member checking, having my analysis undergo peer review and acknowledging my own perspective, as does Peshkin.

Immediately following each interview, I recorded personal comments and reflections about the interview. Questions and comments included, but were not limited to, the following: 'What were my reactions to what the participant said?' 'Should I have asked another question for clarification?' 'This comment connects with ...' Such anecdotal reflections proved beneficial as I worked to understand participant experiences and perceptions. As well, they provided potential follow-up questions for other interviews. As I transcribed, I made further reflections about what participants said. Again, these notes were useful to me in analyzing the data.

The primary form of data analysis was hermeneutical analysis (Love, 1994). I listened to the audio recordings and transcribed verbatim, although where I have quoted participants in this work, I have made minor edits for ease of reading. During the transcription process, I made reflective comments and notes once again. I found it extremely difficult to focus on only one interview at a time, and it was through this process that I again noticed connections among the interviews and literature. Next, once participants had the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and add or delete information, I read through the transcripts, making notes in the margins. Many of these notes connected to the literature review or to comments made by other participants.

In her 1992 unpublished doctoral dissertation, Joyce Love found that themes can be identified from "repetition within and across interviews…. levels and nature of affect…. historical explanations, descriptions, and interpretations…. explicit and implicit interpretations…. [and] behaviours and expressions of the participants that are different from what was expected" (cited in Love, 1994, pp. 123-124). With this interpretation of

themes in mind, I listened to each interview again and reviewed my personal reflections, looking for themes and important features. I made notes in the margins and highlighted what I interpreted to be significant pieces of information or emerging themes as suggested by Creswell (2007). Appendix 3 outlines the themes or codes suggested by the data.

Once each interview was individually coded for themes, I cross-referenced the themes and journal notes to determine any significant connections (Creswell, 2007) by creating two charts related to the student and parent interviews. After that, I made a third chart that related the student and parent themes to the literature review. Finally, I connected these themes to my own personal educational journey. The process outlined above allowed me to extract and include comments most relevant to the significant themes regardless of the point of view. Keeping the research design, data analysis and limitations in mind, the next chapter is a reporting and analysis of the findings.

CHAPTER III
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through this research project, I sought to understand and value the experiences of children in an alternative educational setting. In many ways, Parkway Alternative could be any regular downtown public school. It is situated in an old school building surrounded by a fenced asphalt yard with a small green space and a few trees. As a public school, the teachers follow the Ontario curriculum. Parkway is an alternative option, however, and this chapter will examine some of the experiences that make it so.

I have come to understand that student experiences directly correlate, not only to their freedom and choice, but perhaps more importantly to adult decisions. It appears to me that what parents think and do is directly related to the trust they place in their own experiences. This trust in turn influences their belief and trust that their children will learn what they need to learn when it is needed. This idea of trust was consciously or unconsciously spoken throughout my interviews with parents, and seems to be the overarching theme within this study. An integral part of that trust is inherent in the school structure or environment and in the sense of community. Student experiences are directly or indirectly influenced by these areas and in order to explore these more fully, I have organized this section around the three themes of *Trust*, *Environment* and *Community*. These three sections provide a framework for exploring answers to the research questions.

First, through the main theme of *Trust*, the discussion is organized around two main components: *Educational Experiences and Beliefs of Parents* and *Emotions*. These components begin to answer the question of why parents have chosen to send their children to Parkway Alternative. After that, I explore three components of *Environment*: *Freedom*, *Self-Directed Learning* and *Success*. These three parts provide a beginning understanding of student experiences, both from the perspective of children and parents. The final theme of *Community* is explored through five sub-categories: *Whole-School Meetings for Children*, *Committee*, *Parents and Other Volunteers*, *Equity and Diversity*, and *External Influences*. This final theme adds to the discussion about student experiences, parent perceptions and parental involvement in the school. All of these themes and sub-themes are intertwined or connected, but I discuss them separately to

provide a deeper means of understanding the importance of each in the experiences of the individuals in this study and the influences upon these.

Trust

Trust is intricately woven throughout the findings of this study and can be identified within each of the other themes. As well, the concept of trust is examined in several ways in this particular section. First, I explore the trust that underpins how parents see education and learning. Second, I examine the parental trust that is connected to how children feel about their own educational experiences. Accordingly, this trust is a major factor in the influences upon student experiences and it is explored in this section.

Experiences and Beliefs of Parents

This section helps us to answer the research question, "Why did you decide to send your child to Parkway?" The parents in this study trust their own instincts regarding schooling, learning and education. They have been willing to reflect upon and challenge the existing educational system, perhaps because of their own experiences, questions and thirst for understanding. Three of the four parents interviewed shared some educational experiences that have impacted their interest in seeking alternatives for their children. It is important to listen to these stories so that we can begin to understand how our own schooling experiences impact those of our children.

One parent, who said she "was probably a homeschooler at heart," shared her experience at a large mainstream high school in a large city in Ontario:

> I went through experiences, as I got older in school. I was tremendously bored and kind of outraged, as I got older. I thought, 'How could it be?' In fact, in Grade 9 I went and plopped myself down in the principal's office…and I said, 'I can't understand why it's boring. There's so much to learn, and I so much want to learn. How can I be sitting in a classroom watching the clock? I don't get it.'

When I asked her what the principal's answer was, she responded:

> The answer was a once a week meeting with the Board's psychologist. It was a completely individualized, pathologized response because of course, what could the principal do? I got to talk to the psychologist about my troubles, though I didn't really have troubles; I was just bored in school. I was smart and it was boring. And I didn't get why.

Many years ago Summerhill was designed to, "*make the school fit the child* – instead of making the child fit the school" (Neill, 1960/1992, p. 9, emphasis in original). It seems that the parent quoted above attended a school "based upon an adult conception of what a child should be and of how a child should learn" (p. 9). As a teenager, this participant's attempt to reach beyond the mundane was devalued, and instead was met with the idea that she had a problem that needed fixing.

This experience is, in part, why she sought an alternative for her children, for she continued:

> who knows where the passion came from. I guess the certain political belief that schools really, in this time and place function as child-minded services and that they are often about coercion and about management – all of those things that happen in a child's thinking and creativity when what they're engaged in stops because the clock says they have to stop rather than because they've come to the end of their thinking or learning. And I kind of wanted something different; I didn't want that.

Another adult participant talked about growing up in a school that "emulated free school ideas." She explained that this experience happened because of *Hall-Dennis* (1968) and the influence of A.S. Neill's Summerhill movie. However, she explained that she "was really quite shocked when things changed back to being more structured…. It just seemed so archaic when things changed back." Upon becoming aware that Parkway Alternative practices free schooling, she knew she wanted this experience for her child, rather than a school that had, in the words of *Hall-Dennis*, "become outmoded and is failing those it exists to serve" (Ontario Department of Education, 1968, p. 10).

When he was a student, a third parent explained that he spent four years with the same group of students in a gifted program and seemed to enjoy this experience. However, high school was not so great. He describes being "dropped" back in the regular stream, explaining that high school is

> an alienating experience for most kids, when you go from 28 kids or whatever for four years and then now all of a sudden you're in a school of 600 kids, a typical high school. And you're going in the bottom again.

This parent talked about various cliques at school and identified as being part of the counter-culture. He explained how he started thinking about alternatives:

> I always figured there must be some sort of alternatives in high school and, I guess some [of my group] were a little bit intellectual and we'd

> think about alternatives and read Summerhill.… I remember having discussions about alternative education in high school and just trying to figure out – because a lot of stuff we were learning in high school, a lot of it felt irrelevant to anything going on. And there's a lot of rote learning that went on.

The fourth parent did not share any of her experiences in school but rather, ideas that have inspired her thinking. She explained that although her partner had wished he could have been schooled like Summerhill children, "when we were raising [our child] I was really into the whole unschooling ideas." This participant talked about being inspired by a book called *Magical Child* by Joseph Chilton Pearce. Pearce, according to this participant, believes that when children are born

> They have a total understanding of everything and it's only through the way we raise them that we slowly close them down. And he talks about how kids just sit down and start spontaneously playing an instrument but it's only because we make it seem like these things are difficult or you can't do it or you have to work hard so then they stop.

She commented further that, she was not only inspired by Pearce, but also by Ivan Illich's ideas of unschooling:

> I really thought I wouldn't send our child to school. We hadn't even talked about free schools or anything like that. When she was a baby I just started reading so many books about all these things. See, I'm the opposite. I'm very analytical. I read all these things and think, 'Oh, this is how I want to raise my daughter.' Not because I have this gut thing. We're very kind of intellectual and so I kind of really wanted to have her have an opportunity to trust another part first, and she can develop more of the other intellectual also.

While she did not share her experiences in school, this participant wanted something different for her child, as did the other parent respondents.

This something different seems to include greater intellectual engagement than what parents experienced in their own education and, more importantly, a different atmosphere, one that is less structured and more free and involves the opportunity for children to develop according to their own inner selves. Two of the parents in this study mentioned that they originally thought about homeschooling. One mentioned that when she learned about the school's alternative philosophy, she decided that it seemed to provide what she wanted for her children: "I wanted my kids to be free to follow their hearts and I wanted them to learn to live responsibly in community." The second parent,

as indicated above shared that because she herself is so analytical, in considering schooling for her daughter, she wanted to give her "an opportunity to trust another part first."

These four parents think of education and learning differently than the mainstream as it is reflected in the most common examples of schooling in society and in popular images, and these parents have sought alternatives for their children. Though these thoughts and experiences do not necessarily encompass all of the reasons for sending children to this alternative school, we begin to gain an understanding of parental trust as an underlying component of this choice. These stories connect to the ideas of emotions as discussed earlier in this work (Hampton, 1996; Neill, 1960/1992; Ontario Department of Education, 1968), and I examine this discussion next for it supports a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the alternative choice.

Emotions

The theme of *Emotions* provides further insights into why parents have chosen an alternative school for their children. As well, it offers a beginning picture of student experiences and parental perceptions of these. Parents understand the importance of trusting their own experiences and feelings, and those of their children. The students in this study generally enjoy this school. When asked about the school, children responded with the following: "it's fun," "great in a lot of ways," and "this school is better than my other ones." They spoke about traditional school topics like reading, writing and math, along with special activities like swimming, building snowpeople, and a school-wide camping trip. One parent said, "My kids love school, they want to be there and they have a lot of control over their environment. They have freedom and contentedness; happiness." Another parent indicated that her child is

> happier than she was at her previous school which was a normal public school. At Parkway she's able to be the person that she wants to be and she doesn't feel that she has to meet anybody else's expectations of how she's supposed to be.

Later, this participant's daughter described an emotional experience at a mainstream school where her struggle to keep up with the rest of the class in spelling resulted in

extreme frustration and anger. According to her mom, when she came to the school in this study, these emotional outbursts stopped.

Clearly, these parents consider emotions an important factor in learning, as outlined elsewhere in this work. This phenomenon supports Leslie Hart's (1983) research on the brain and learning. Simply put, Hart says, "Learning involves emotions" (p. 102). Further, "it becomes plain that *absence of threat is utterly essential to effective instruction*" (p. 109, emphasis in original). The well-educated parents in this study may or may not be consciously aware of this information on learning; regardless, it is clear from their comments that they know this in their hearts, for they have chosen a school in which their children thrive. In the words of one parent,

> I feel she feels really loved at that school by the teachers and everyone. It's just a safe place for her to explore things. Like I said, her personality, she's quite respectful and compliant. So if she was in a regular classroom, if the teacher was very authoritarian, she would really feel she had to sit quietly and do those things. It would also inhibit her from trying things. Whereas in this environment, because it's so supportive and loving she can do all kinds of things that she wouldn't be afraid to push the boundaries.

Parents value and trust the emotional experiences of their children. Parkway Alternative provides a supportive atmosphere where children feel safe to be themselves, take risks and grow, and parents trust that this environment is one that will support and encourage their children. This theme of emotion, then, provides a greater insight into the reasons behind choosing an alternative, as well as a beginning understanding of student experiences. An examination of the environment of the school, which I turn to next, provides another opportunity to explore various student experiences. This discussion furthers our understanding of influences upon the experiences of individuals in this setting.

Environment

Along with trusting themselves and their children, parents seem to trust the environment, or the underlying structures that support students and their learning. The educational environment students find themselves within clearly influences their experiences, and thus we need to address two questions: "What are student experiences?"

and "What influences these experiences?" In order to examine these questions more closely, I have divided this section into three sub-themes: *Freedom*, *Self-Directed Learning* and *Success*. Though these sub-themes are interwoven, I discuss them separately, so as to understand them more deeply.

Freedom

Neill (1960/1992) stated that:

> Obviously, a school that makes active children sit at desks studying mostly useless subjects is a bad school. It is only a good school for those who believe in such a school, for those uncreative citizens who want docile, uncreative children who will fit into a civilization whose standard of success is money….
>
> You cannot make children learn music or anything else without to some degree converting them into will-less adults. You fashion them into accepters of the *status quo*. (pp. 7, 15, emphasis in original)

Children at Parkway Alternative do not seem to be forced to learn. They appear to be offered freedom. Why is this freedom important to them? How does it support them? What does it look like? First consider the physical environment. Rather than separate grades in each classroom, students are organized into multi-grade groupings with separate floors for each group. As well, one student participant explained the following:

> You don't sit in desks. You sit wherever you want and you don't have classrooms where one teacher's class is just one room. The whole entire floor is one classroom sort of – different rooms for different stuff to do each day.

This structure offers students the freedom to move between and within the two large groups as directed by their individual needs and interests.

Second, children have the freedom to go to school or not. That is, they are not forced to attend school. It appears that this freedom is partly because there is, as one parent said, "absolutely no attendance pressure" and partly due to parent and student preferences and needs. For example, one of the parents shared that although her daughter attends school regularly, she seems to prefer to do work at home rather than at school. School for her supports more of a social need. According to another parent, in her family the children love going to school; they became "addicted" and prefer to go to school rather than stay home.

In a similar way, freedom unfolds itself in this school through lateness. Two students and the parents of the third student mentioned lateness. One student said, "The really great thing I like about this school is that if you get there a couple minutes late, nothing happens." Though this study is not meant to compare this school with a traditional one, it is interesting to note a comparison made by the second student: "In my other schools, we always had to go early and if we didn't we always had to check in at the counter. But you can go as late as you want here." As this student mentions, and from my own experience, in traditional schools students who are late must sign-in at the office thereby missing more class time. This practice can become increasingly problematic as suggested in the *Early School Leavers Report*: "Parents identified that the practice of marking students absent for being late and suspending them for truancy was putting kids at greater risk for falling behind in their classes and dropping out of school" (Community Health Systems Resource Group, 2005, p. 37).

While some might argue that children need to learn to be prompt because that is a skill they will need in the work force, I wonder, Do individuals have an innate ability to be prompt or do they learn to be prompt when they have a need or are interested in the task at hand? For example, with the exception of circumstances beyond their control, children in my classes who tended to be late were never late for special events at school or off-campus trips. Interestingly, none of the students gave examples of if and why they themselves have ever been late. It would be interesting to examine just why and how often students in this study might choose to be late when they seem to enjoy being at the school. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that they can be. That is, they are given the option.

The two parents who talked about home schooling had similar reasons for deciding to send their children to Parkway Alternative. Each indicated that, especially at first, they tended to use the school as a drop-in centre, able to come and go, and stay with their children as needed. One of them said,

> The other huge thing about this school is that experience of them closing the door on kids going to Kindergarten classes was absolutely unheard of. My other son was not like this at all, very reticent to be there without us, and so we just went to school.… We hung out, and that's how the school operated. They loved it.

It is important to note that these parents are each well-educated and, in some capacity, are able to support their children at home, and I will discuss this situation in more detail later. However, it is important to ask several questions at this point: What about parents who are themselves not educated or cannot offer this type of support? Are their children somehow disadvantaged if they do not go to school regularly? This freedom to attend school or not is linked to trust and is something to be considered in more depth in another study.

Freedom may also unfold itself in how comfortable individuals are with being themselves. One of the parents reflected that, compared to another school, her child now feels free to be herself:

> She felt very constrained at the other school to fit into the notions that the girls had about what was appropriate for a girl to do and what was inappropriate….she's an extremely creative person and comes up with ideas that are not mainstream ideas. She was often chastised by the other girls who were having ideas that were just like everybody else's.

This participant's daughter talked about her experiences prior to enrolling in Parkway Alternative. She said that whenever she tried to be herself one of the other girls said mean comments and made rude faces. At this alternative school, the participant feels like she can be more of herself. At times when she cannot, she seems to feel comfortable sorting it out herself or talking with the teachers.

Finally, students have freedom at Parkway Alternative through self-directed learning. Children of all ages at this school are given the opportunity to determine how they spend their time, what they learn and how. Self-directed learning seems to be a major component and there are many aspects of it to explore. Thus, with the theme of freedom woven throughout, I next explore the impact of self-directed learning on student experiences.

Self-Directed Learning

One of the main features of Parkway Alternative is the opportunity for children to direct their own learning. Like the school in Dunn's (1998) study, Parkway Alternative is publicly funded, and thus teachers are required to follow a specified curriculum. It was not the intent of this study to ascertain the specifics around curriculum implementation.

However, as will be shown in this section, it appears that students gain access to the content of the curriculum through what seems like traditional and non-traditional pedagogy. I begin this section with a discussion of one parent's perception of self-directed learning. Then, I explore self-directed learning for primary students and discuss how this phenomenon is different for the junior students. After that, I explain the importance of choice for everyone. Following that is a brief discussion of the impact that teachers have on student experiences. These various components of self-directed learning provide us with some useful information about student experiences.

One of the parent participants helped me understand the nature of the school in her explanation of student-directed learning:

> It is assumed that, the same way that students when they are young children learn how to talk and walk without anybody directing them on how to do these things, that students will continue to want to become part of society without people directing them on the exact way they have to do it. So that if you leave students to do things as they see fit, they'll develop in ways that are most appropriate for them and they'll find ways to fit into society that are much more long term than they would otherwise if they were directed to do things that they had no interest in.

Similarly, Pearce (1997) states that, "An astonishing capacity for creative power is built into our genes, ready to unfold. Our innate capacities of mind are nothing less than miraculous, and we are born with a driving intent to express this capacity" (p. 3). Within the structure of this school, it does not mean that adults have no place. Of primary importance, as explicitly stated or implicitly suggested by the four parents in this study, is the underlying trust they have that their children will learn what they need to learn when it is needed. Second, as will be discussed later, adults act as "opportunities" for growth and learning.

It is important to note here that, interestingly enough, when asked questions like "What did you learn?" the children in this study had a difficult time articulating exactly what they learned. In one of the student interviews, when I changed the wording to "What kinds of things did you do?" the child told me about an interesting school project called "Moon Lake where everybody built a house and they had their own person and … you can still see the ruins of it." I discussed this phenomenon of word-choice with one of the parents. She explained it this way:

> Mostly they don't know they are learning, so if you ask her 'How are you learning?' she wouldn't know how to answer, because she's just doing things but she really doesn't think of it as being taught…. that's what's so nice about it. It's just so holistic it's just the way of being; being in the world and being interested and engaged in things and not thinking about needing to learn things that, you know, 'you need this piece and you need this.'

This inability to articulate or lack of interest in articulating what is learned may in fact be the case for children in mainstream schools as well. One of my relatives, for example, who recently completed Grade 6 in a mainstream school, rarely has much to say when asked "What did you learn?" or even "What did you do today?" unless the event was extremely exciting or out of the ordinary. It might be interesting to further investigate this concept by undertaking a comparison study of this phenomenon with children in mainstream and alternative schools.

With this understanding of self-directed in mind, I next explore how self-directed learning is different for children in the primary and junior grades, and for individual students. This discussion provides further information for understanding the overarching research question about student experiences. For clarification purposes, participants in this study referred to "little kids" (JK-Grade 3 students) and "big kids" (Grade 4-6 students), and I will use these terms throughout.

The little kids

Though none of the children in this study were primary-age students at the time of the interviews, they each talked about the differences between the little kids and the big kids, as did their parents. One parent explained that

> The little kids' classroom is much more constructed by the kids. So there's a schedule up and the kids decide we'd like to have cooking class… For a while the kids decided they wanted to have French even though the Board doesn't provide French teachers for that age, but the kids decided 'Let's have French' so one of the teachers made a French class…. The teacher will say, 'OK, French is happening, does anybody want to come?' The teachers will walk around the class and they'll get a little gaggle of 10 kids and that will be French. It is much less structured like that.

This type of environment allows for opportunities for freedom. As one student put it, "I can be more free. When I was with the little kids I could do pretty much whatever I wanted." This freedom also demonstrates a large amount of trust. Parents and teachers

trust that the children will do or learn something worthwhile. This concept is perhaps a difficult one for some to accept, as it was for me originally, for surely children would not always ask for a class of some sort as in the above example. What really would the children do with this freedom? The following discussion will help to explain.

Play is an important aspect of this freedom within the structure of the school and its student-directed nature. In reflecting upon what she did as a little kid, one participant said, "I know I played in the sandbox and I drew a lot." Though this participant did not necessarily realize that she was learning, her mom maintains that she was. This mother has come to understand that "play is work and it is the best kind of work." She provided the following example:

> For her to just play in the sandbox with water, I feel that she understands the properties of water just because she's always working in it. And then when she later looks at it in an analytical way she will already have an integral understanding of it.

This parent trusts that her daughter's opportunity to play will support her learning of something worthwhile.

This participant's partner agreed by explaining that play is another kind of learning. In other words, there is learning value in play, and not just academics. Greenburg (1995) discusses this other type of value:

> The fact is, play is a big part of life at Sudbury Valley. And it is one of the prime factors of learning here. But what is learned is a different lesson than you might think. What is learned is the ability to concentrate and focus attention unsparingly on the task at hand, without regard for limitations – no tiredness, no rushing, no need to abandon a hot idea in the middle to go on to something else. This 'lesson' is retained for life. (p. 81)

Play is regarded as a valuable experience for Kindergarten children in Ontario, although the MEO states that there should be "*planned* opportunities for learning-based play" (MEO, 2006b, p. 14, emphasis added). From her different perspective, the mother quoted above has come to understand the value in *self-directed* play as learning for her child. Ricci (2008, 2007a) also understands the value of unstructured, self-directed play, for example, when his daughter learned to recognize and write numbers, and improve swimming skills. Perhaps some children, in either mainstream or alternative settings, need the direction provided through planned play; this study, however, does not include such a comparison.

If play is work and work is learning, consider another parent's comment that, "learning is not for the most part seen to be a chore." This comment made me wonder if children at this school are cajoled or coerced into learning, and I asked this parent about it. She said, "They are absolutely cajoled. I have a very low tolerance for coercion so I would say sometimes they are coerced. I think by anybody else's standards that would be a clear 'No' to that." She explained that the coercion, though less in recent years, sounds like "Grade 1s have to do one work, Grade 2s have to do two works." What this means is "a little bit of reading or a little bit of writing or a little bit of math, so the kids will get encouraged into that." She spoke at length about this, and also about her concerns around it:

> This would be one of my critiques of the school that I think there's a little bit sometimes of that sense of well, there's fun and then there's work. And I would say a school like this one should probably be better at making or kind of breaking down that distinction. In reality, the distinction gets broken down in lots of ways because kids are doing things all day that are fun that are learning and they just don't call it work.

I wonder where this pressure to do "work" comes from? Is it because this is a publicly funded school and adults feel that they need some sort of "proof" of the learning? Is it the result of the effects of adult's own traditional education? Is it an attempt to control? This parent did in fact suggest that perhaps it had to do with control:

> One of the things that happens, I think, is if you have kids who are disruptive, then, you need to wrangle them more into doing things. So I would say kids are generally speaking content and engaged and playing; they don't get pushed around very much. If they're bored or if they are tearing up and down the halls, and there's even a fair amount of tolerance for that kind of goofiness in this school, but if it becomes disruptive, then you get more coerced.

None of the other parents talked about coercion and in fact, this parent later said "it's pretty low on the coercion scale." However, there is the perception that some children are coerced and controlled more than others. Perhaps, as this parent suggests, it has to do with learning to behave responsibly. I wonder if the coercion to complete "work" is the right way? As I will discuss later, there are other structures in place, such as Committee, to support living responsibly in community and I am left to wonder where this pressure is coming from?

Neill (1960/1992) has explored this concept through a discussion of play and control. He believed that adults do not give children enough time to play and that "every child has been hot housed into being an adult long before he [or she] has reached adulthood" (p. 38). Neill explained one of the reasons behind this phenomenon:

> Fear is at the root of adult antagonism to children's play…. Hundreds of times I have heard the anxious query, 'But if my boy plays all day, how will he ever learn anything, how will he ever pass exams?' Very few will accept my answer, 'If your child plays all he wants to play, he will be able to pass university entrance exams after two years' intensive study, instead of the usual five, six, or seven years of learning in a school that discounts play as a factor in life.'
>
> But I always have to add, 'That is – if he ever wants to pass the exams!' He may want to become a ballet dancer or an engineer. She may want to be a dress designer or a carpenter. (p. 39)

Neill knew the importance of letting children experience freedom on their way to developing into mature, capable adults, and trusting that they will do so. This freedom to be true to oneself was echoed in parental comments as discussed earlier.

Whether it advances one's understanding of the properties of water, supports the development of concentration or honours a child's thinking or individuality, clearly the little kids in this study are given the freedom to explore and direct their world. As discussed, there are some ways in which the little kids at this school are directed, and the big kids are no exception. Next, is a discussion of the structure of the environment for the older students or big kids.

The big kids

Time after time, I was told that there is a different structure in place at this school for the big kids. As one of the students explained, one of the differences is that with the big kids there are set classes and a schedule. The student also indicated that if you really did not want to do the class "you wouldn't be forced, but everybody did." This type of comment, echoed by several parents, contributed to my confusion about self-directed learning. If children are not forced to attend classes, why do they go? Is it really a choice or just an illusion? Does this issue relate to Neill's (1960/1992) theory that "when a child has played enough he [or she] will start to work and face difficulties" (p. 33).

In a mainstream school, if a child does not want to follow the schedule, he or she would be coerced, cajoled or bribed. Habitually non-compliant children would likely be

sent to the principal's office, often grudgingly returning to the classroom to "learn." Yet, at Parkway Alternative, I heard from all of the child participants and several of the parents that the big kids did tend to follow the set schedule. As I listened to parents and students, I wondered if students really do have the opportunity to be self-directed. If they are indeed self-directed, why do they follow the schedule?

There are several answers to these questions. One of the students mentioned that, for him, it was a personal preference: "I always followed the schedule. I don't know why. I didn't like doing stuff by myself." Another student said,

> When I was upstairs as a little kid I could do pretty much whatever I wanted. But when I went downstairs as a big kid they actually told me to do stuff but if I didn't want to do it, I didn't have to; but sometimes I really did have to do it so that made me feel good because it's really hard to think of what to do all day at school.

For this student, she sometimes likes and needs direction, and sometimes really does have to do things. This situation causes some confusion for me. Does it relate to the idea of coercion and control? Perhaps, but she also indicated that the structure within the classes depends somewhat on the teacher. For example, the student said, "We really have to listen to what [our teacher] is doing… [Our teacher] is more of a regular school person" but in another class "we usually always do our own thing. We ask if we can work on a special project or something. And then [our teacher] says 'Sure.'"

The third student said that now that she's with the "big kids" they don't tend to decide on their own as much. However, she suggested that within the classes, she appreciates the choices offered:

> My teachers usually give us an option. Either we do math from the board or play math games, or in language we write novel studies or we can read or we can make a story or a project. I like working on my novel study.

Her parent later mentioned that she is

> a very independent learner and so actually does very little downstairs [with the big kids]. She goes upstairs [with the little kids] a lot…. her nature is to be, not compliant, but respectful and she's not particularly selfish like 'I want to do this kind of thing.' She would try to go along anyways.

Upon reflection, I found these comments to be somewhat paradoxical. Are some children given more freedom than others? How is this freedom determined? Does the structure of

the school not meet the needs of all the children? Do some children get less freedom because they need to be controlled, as mentioned earlier? A more thorough investigation is necessary to fully answer these questions. However, the following discussion with another parent participant may provide a partial understanding.

One of the parents and I talked about self-directed learning for the big kids. She said that students "can opt out of the whole thing all year long" then explained that the structure for the big kids is fairly recent and has come about as a result of graduates' concerns:

> Up until two years ago there was no student-directed school to go to beyond the Grade 6. The schools that they went to were all places where they were teacher directed. So one of the reasons why the juniors started to be more class-oriented was because the teachers wanted to prepare them for what they were going to be seeing once they left Parkway. The teachers didn't want them to be absolutely shocked when they left with no idea of what's going on.

Further, she explained that some children are self-directed learners and some are not. This idea is similar to the earlier discussion about self-directed learning (Kerka, 1994; Oddi, 1987). As well, Dunn (1998) also discusses varying degrees of a self-directed nature and that teachers differentiate their instructional supports accordingly.

I wondered if it was the graduates who were not really self-directed who came back angry. The participant agreed, and continued with the following explanation:

> Parents may believe in self-directed, but their particular child doesn't have the confidence to want to be that way. So it's upsetting for those parents. They've spent their whole lives trying to get the child to understand what being student-directed is, being responsible, and the child says, 'I don't want to take responsibility and I just want to do what my friends are doing and I just want to get the work done and give it in and I don't care about what's happening at the school.' So it's very disappointing for those parents, and I've seen that happen with people. They're shocked that things didn't turn out the way they thought; but, given that they believe in student-direction, they also allow their child to do whatever it is he or she wants to do and are supportive.

Thus, it appears that children are supported not only by the changing structure of the school, but also by their parents. I wonder though what other supports need to be put in place to support all students at a school like Parkway? How does one know if an individual has or will want to have a self-directing nature? Does it relate to the perception

that some students need more control? Can a school such as this one support the development of SDL? Is it desirable to do so? Have any students ever left the school because it did not meet their needs? Further, even though the school is willing to change to meet the needs of children, if some children just do not want to be self-directed, does this mean, then, that the school is not appropriate for all students? Can this sense of responsibility be developed through such a school? Some of these questions I briefly explore elsewhere in this work; however, many of these questions will require a more in-depth study and analysis.

Perhaps one way that students' needs are met is through choice. There are many components to choice and because it appears to be a main part of the experience of self-directed learning, I discuss it separately.

Choice

Within the structure of self-directed learning students have the option to ask the teacher if they can do something other than the teacher-directed learning task. One parent indicated "there are always a couple of kids at [the school] sitting in the hall reading. Always." Of note, however, is that none of the students in this study shared such an experience, though one student discussed initiating her own projects. For example, she was writing a graphic novel and also working on a creative project that she "just thought about."

One parent talked at length about the self-directed learning that occurs in woodworking with the little kids:

> Most people would teach woodworking in a more product driven way. They'd want the kids to make something… However you realize it's not really important what they make. They nail together three pieces of wood and they're really happy. It's great. They learn how to use a hammer, how to use a nail. They learn how to cut a piece of wood. Even doing that gives them a tool for doing things later on.

He continued by explaining how this type of woodworking is different than the kits you get in stores:

> This is scrap wood and they would learn how to use a saw to make it whatever shape they want and then if it's not straight, it's short, you show them this is how you do it and then the next time they get better and better and better. It's some kind of skill development. I think in order to try to

> make sure they make a product is secondary. They have visions… You don't need to have a finished product.

Can one develop a sense of accomplishment from a teacher-directed activity? No doubt that is possible. However, this example highlights that it is not always *necessary* and does not always require a pre-set curriculum.

In fact, the parent continued by explaining that children are capable of directing themselves when given the opportunity. He explained that one of the little kids, maybe six, "was really very together as far as exactly what he wanted to build." This boy created a woodworking project with a joint in it and then set out to make another project "which was a lot more complicated." This project involved planning, estimating, measuring, cutting, manipulating, and problem solving. Though he could have been directed to practise these skills in other ways, the experience was possible because he was given the opportunity to direct his own learning. According to this participant's partner there is a cost to the child when the teacher directs the end product:

> If you [the teacher] have an idea of what [the children] have to do then there's a cost to what their own intention is. There's a price for it. Whereas if they get to do what they want to do, then they're always interested, and keep moving towards what their own goal is.

She continued with, "It's also a sense of accomplishment. Instead of having all these pre-cut things you just attach, you do it yourself."

Another benefit of Parkway Alternative, then, is the chance for children to set and work toward their own goals. A more thorough examination would explain the exact process of goal setting in this school. Goal setting is common in mainstream schooling as well; however, it is usually based upon pre-conceived notions about what children should do and accomplish.

Other examples of choice seem to have originated from the teachers. All of the children talked about these types of choices within classes such as projects on topics of interest or novel studies on books of choice. I was somewhat surprised at these examples for they are often possibilities within mainstream schools. In fact, other comments suggested that there is a mix of traditional and non-traditional teaching at this school. For example, students might use textbooks for math or be involved in math in innovative ways. One parent shared a story about when his daughter was in Kindergarten. The

teacher asked students to figure out all of "the possible permutations of white and black marbles that were in a box." As the parent watched, he was amazed at the thinking that ensued:

> They all had these different ways of approaching it, and so as an adult, you're going, 'I don't know.' In your mind you're thinking there's only one way to do this answer. But in these kids' minds there's a zillion different ways to look at this.... And, it was fascinating to see the difference. I thought that kind of class summed up the whole lot of difference about Parkway versus the regular curriculum. It's like Matt Hearn says about regular school: the teacher says 'You've only got so much time and there's so much material; it's like pouring a gallon into a thimble or something. You just got to keep pouring and hope they get it.'

As mentioned by one of the students, this parent said that some junior classes at this school tend to be more structured, perhaps due to the content of the subject area; however, within the structure they always try to "take it back to the tangible, the practical." In Science for example,

> They did a whole thing on clouds and they had a whole cloud chart. Every day, they'd ask the kids what were the clouds today, what do you think the weather is going to be.... And so rather than just doing it out of the textbook… the kids actually had to apply their understanding and knowledge and try to figure out what's going on. It makes them more observant and aware.

It appears that self-directed learning has many components to it, from play for the little kids to more structure for the big kids and from projects initiated by children to choice within teacher-initiated tasks. As well, it seems that children have varying preferences or interest in the different components of self-directed learning. Choice, it would seem, is a valuable underlying piece of self-directed learning. I am somewhat surprised that there are some similarities to mainstream schools. In fact, I know there are teachers in mainstream schools practising some of these alternatives. Perhaps in both cases self-directed learning relates to changing assumptions about learning as suggested by Vincent (1999). Is it possible to have more schools like Parkway? A more in-depth study on this point would prove beneficial. It may be that the teacher plays a huge role in this regard, and I examine this next. In doing so we gain more information about the influences upon student experiences.

Teachers

Another important piece of the puzzle around self-directed learning is the teachers. The parents in this study indicated that regardless of what was happening in the classrooms, the teachers all knew the children.

> But the nice thing about…all the teachers actually is they're very kid focused. They really pay attention to what the kids understand and what they don't understand…. A lot of my experience from other schools is that there's the curriculum and that just sort of marches roughshod over all the individuals. Whereas you really see at Parkway the teachers will really pay attention to gauging where the kids are at and understanding what their knowledge level is.

Of course, teachers in traditional schools are expected to know what the students know and are indeed encouraged to begin with what they know. As well, they are being encouraged to teach math in the manner described above, through problem solving (Fosnot & Dolk, 2001; Ministry of Education of Ontario, 2006c; Small, 2008; Van de Walle, 2001). However, from my experience, the pressures of EQAO testing and trying to get through the entire curriculum, writing report cards, dealing with behaviour problems and the plethora of non-teaching responsibilities often overshadow the individual child's needs. For example, in a recent conversation with a mainstream education colleague, she described how she felt she needed to rush through rote textbook materials in mathematics to get through it all for the EQAO test. It is disheartening to know that such pressures are impacting students' opportunities for engagement in authentic learning experiences. At Moore's Creek, Dunn (1998) noted that "there was some drift towards more traditional practices in the classrooms" (p. 7) perhaps as a result of external pressures upon teachers. Are there such pressures for teachers at this school? If so, how do these impact the children? Though this study did not set out to address these questions, participant comments suggest that this pressure may impact their experiences. The following discussion may provide a starting point for an in-depth examination.

One of the youth interviewed stated that teachers do sometimes have bad days where they yell, get upset or do not listen. Regarding one situation, this student indicated, "I always listen because I don't want to get into trouble. I hate the feeling." She also indicated that the teacher could also be really playful when not stressed and does indeed apologize for "not thinking."

Though one parent did state that "there are better and worse teachers," none of the other participants shared similar experiences to the student above. In fact, one student said, "The teachers are all really great." In another parent's opinion, her child "loves them all… It's not like a big authority thing…she's just at home with them…. They're not stiff role models or anything." Her partner agreed saying, "They're all human. They're people." In my own experience, in showing my "human-ness" to students, they see that learning does not stop just because you are an adult; learning, whether academic or personal, is for life. In fact, learning is life and it is through our human-ness that we experience this learning. John Holt (2004) writes:

> As Ivan Illich says, there is no knowledge in the world; the world is as it is. Knowledge is a process in the minds of living people. It is what we do as we try to find out who and where we are, and what is going on about us. (p. 17)

Our human-ness, that idea of trying to find out who we are, provides for each one of us a lens through which to better know and understand ourselves, and the world around us.

When a teacher yells or gets upset, is this an example of external pressures impacting teachers, showing their human-ness or something else? The scope of this study does not include such an investigation and thus, it is impossible to say. However, if this pressure impacts even one student, it bears further investigation. As such, it might be worthwhile for this community and the mainstream system to consider the following: How can we support all students *and* teachers?

Self-directed learning, play, choice, freedom, individuality and teachers all play a role in the school environment. The school structure has become a window through which we can begin to understand student experiences and it is through all of these components that parents seem to trust that their children will learn what is important for them to learn. It is through this structure that we can also examine the measure of a student's success in this school. The following section answers the questions "Are you doing well in school?" and "Is your child successful at school?" by examining what some individuals in this school think about success; as before, trust remains the strong foundation.

Success

Traditionally, students, parents and teachers look to a student's marks and test results to determine how successfully a student is learning. Indeed, I earlier identified marks as my own way to determine whether or not I was successful. Time and again, at the school in this study, parents and students indicated that there are no marks, no grades and no report cards. Of note is that all of the parents at Parkway Alternative have opted to withdraw their children from EQAO testing. This option is, in fact, available for all parents in the province (ETFO, 2009b, *EQAO testing: Helping students survive*, para. 1). Clearly, success can be measured and communicated in other ways.

The parents that participated in this research project unanimously shared an internal belief that their children are and will be successful. Students themselves generally indicated that they are successful. With no traditional marks, grades or report cards, there are other indicators of whether or not children are successful. One student said,

> The other thing about Parkway is that they write report cards, but we don't receive them unless you ask for them. And, instead of that, you have parent-student-teacher interviews or conferences throughout the year to talk about how you think you're doing and stuff.

In fact, this participant's mother agreed. She said:

> There are none of the standard measurements. My children have never received a report card, have never received a mark or a grade. They didn't know what it was, an A, a B, a C, a D. They'd never received something back, a written piece of work with comments on it that said excellent, good, not so good, nothing. There were none of those markers. And, as my child said, the way that you kind of got a sense of how your kid was doing, other than your innate sense, or being in the school, which lots of us are as parents, was having these parent-teacher-student conferences that would involve all three parties and you'd just sit down and the teacher would say, 'How's it going?' Mostly they would ask the kid, 'How do you feel?' and if there were problems they'd get brought up.

This philosophy of no marks is similar to the beliefs and practices of a number of others, such as Gatto (2005), Greenburg (1995), Holt (2004), Kohn (1999) and Ricci (2007b).

Without external indicators of success, such as marks, parents look to other indicators. Parents had varying beliefs about what indicates that their children are successful. One parent said of her daughter that "Yes, she's successful at school. She is

an extremely good artist and she is extremely good at saying what it is that she thinks is important. She's very articulate about what she thinks is important, and she's very self-motivated." This parent looks to her daughter for indications of her success.

When I asked this mother if she looked for any other indications that her daughter is being successful, her response was not very surprising: "I'm not interested in any other indications. The school has no marks, no grades and no report cards and if people want those things then they should be considering a school other than Parkway." Did other parents believe that traditional indications of success were not important and/or that their children would succeed regardless? Possibly, as other parents in the study made similar comments.

For example, another parent indicated that she has a "pretty innate belief that they're going to be successful" and that "the markers that you would normally use in a school system to determine a kid's learning don't hold at Parkway." A third parent suggested that her child probably wouldn't be considered successful in a traditional sense because "she doesn't like to just buckle down and do Math, like in those traditional ways school is supposed to be." Her partner added that, "as a representative of Parkway she's very successful…as a representative of this style of education…she's very self-confident, self-reliant." The parents in this study seemed to concern themselves more with their children's happiness and personal fulfillment than with traditional academics. What did these parents think about skills such as reading? This discussion follows.

In most if not all mainstream schools, there are targets, especially for reading. Conversely, one parent in this study talked about the importance of following a child's own internal learning clock. When her son did not learn to read until his Grade 3 year, it was not identified as a problem, similar to Sudbury Valley (Greenburg, 1995) experiences. The parent said:

> There was no pathologizing of it at all. There was no pressure, really, to learn how to read. There was a kind of a peer pressure I would say if anything. Some time in the beginning of Grade 3, he came to me and he said, 'Mom, I don't think I read as well as all the other kids.'

He did learn to read and is now a "voracious reader." We did not discuss how he did learn, but this parent suggested that it was not necessarily a result of the teacher's intervention because he didn't have a very good teacher that year.

Another mother also talked about her child learning to read. Though there were books in the home and the child was read to, the parent "didn't teach her any of the letters" prior to starting school. At school she said that

> they used to test her once in awhile. Someone would come and sit and see how far she is, what she could read and stuff like that. They didn't seem to be concerned that she wasn't reading a lot. There was no pathologizing of it, but just when she was ready, she engaged.

The parents I interviewed seemed to appreciate that their children were offered the freedom to develop at their own pace. Success, therefore, connects to freedom. Success also relates to the main overarching theme of trust. It may be a trust in the children, a trust that they will develop according to their own time clock. I think, however, that this trust is also intertwined with a trust in the school as all of the parents made the decision to enrol their children there. Could it also be a trust in the teachers? Regardless of how parents perceive teachers' skills or connections to their children, these parents and their children all choose to stay at the school. It may further be a trust in the parents themselves that they will be able to provide opportunities for their children.

Students articulated a limited sense of or limited ability to articulate their own progress. When I asked one of them, "Are you doing well in school?" she indicated "yes." When I asked her how she knows, she said, "I got a lot of work done during the school." When asked the same question, another student's reply was, "I guess so." She did not say what she was good at, but easily identified a weakness: "The only thing I'm really bad at is how to tell time with the old fashioned clock, the circle clock. I don't have the slightest clue how to read those." This comment brought back memories of my own struggles to learn to read an analogue clock! Of course, in my school, I learned this skill through repeated exposure and practise. I suppose it felt good to finally learn this skill, but it was painful. As one parent put it, "when you learn things when they're meaningful to you, you learn them easily and quickly, and when you learn them when you don't want to learn them, then it's torturous." Perhaps learning to read an analogue clock has no meaning for the above-quoted student. I asked her, "Do you have an interest in learning how, or does it matter to you?" She replied,

> Well, I want to, but I definitely don't really – well, I want to just learn it like, 'Poof. I learned it.' But I don't really want to take, I don't want to sit down and learn about it. I just want to know.

Despite the freedom and trust offered to children, one of the parents considers this lack of push as a "kind of risk." She said,

> Your kids are rarely pushed to do something they don't want to do. So they don't have that experience of, 'Oh, I have to write this paper, I really don't want to do it. Oh, I did it and it feels good because I did it.' My kids have a lot of unfinished projects. They were super enthusiastic. They started and then they never really finished and as my child said, there's not really any consequence for not finishing.

Though one of the children also mentioned an unfinished project none of the other parents interviewed indicated that it was a problem. In fact, the parent who brought up the concern also stressed that when her child wanted or needed to learn something, it happened. For instance, when her child had to do some writing

> that required research and thinking and structuring, it was phenomenal to see how quickly he learned… it wasn't like it was a deficit. He hadn't worked on these skills and when he needed to work on them, he did it and it worked. He's bright and he did it fast. It was kind of everything I imagined about that pedagogical approach. When they need to do it, they do it.

Would this sort of quick learning happen for all individuals? What about those who are not considered "bright" in an academic sort of way? Would they have problems?

Clearly, student experiences are influenced by how success is defined and determined. From an innate personal belief to collaborative conferences, trust is present. This trust is felt not only by the students, teachers and parents, but also in the community as a whole. Without such a strong sense of community, trust would not be as easily identifiable. Community is a vital component of this school and therefore of student experience, and the following section examines this theme in-depth.

Community

Individuals in this study used the word "community" in two different ways: with phrases like "the community" or "our community" as a distinct *thing*, and "in Community" as if it is something integral to the school, an underlying component of the structure. This distinction will be noted with the use of a capital "C." Throughout the interviews, the theme of community was expressed in many ways, and in order to support a discussion of its importance, I have organized the data into five subcategories:

Whole-School Meetings for Children, *Committee*, *Parents and Other Volunteers*, *Diversity and Equity*, and *External Influences*. Through these discussions, we get a sense of student and parental involvement in making policies and rules. As well, this discussion supports a growing understanding of the influences upon student experiences.

Whole-School Meetings for Children

Students have opportunities to support the workings of the school. Children not only participate in student meetings and help make decisions about the school, but they also have the opportunity to take on leadership roles at these meetings. One parent indicated that these meetings "are where problems are brought, and where sometimes quite significant decisions about the school are made." These meetings, designed after the Summerhill model, provide an opportunity for both children and adults to have an equal voice in the school. Over time, the content and structure of these meetings tend to change. These changes are likely due to the varying needs and preferences of the changing community. As one of the student participants pointed out about the school in general, "It probably changes a lot depending on which kids are there and how things get set up." Currently, for example, these meetings are scheduled at the end of the day, so as to include parents.

Some individuals might say that children are not capable of making important decisions about their school. However, this parent was quite explicit about the significance of these meetings:

> Sometimes the teachers will bring up issues but just as often, kids…. I think the kids have no clue how significant that is in terms of they own that school. If they don't like rules, they get to say 'We don't like this rule,' 'We don't like it that only one kid is allowed to do this at a time,' or 'We want to have a rule that says this.' And the teachers' voices are significant there for sure and they help. It's not a free for all. There certainly is the kind of leadership and wisdom and sometimes out and out overriding by the teachers, but generally speaking, those kids have a lot of control and a lot of say…. Whenever I go to them I'm just completely inspired about the school…. As much as anything, just to see 60 or 70 kids or whatever it is, sitting down, hashing out very fundamental things about the place they spend every day. It's pretty amazing.

Again, trust appears to be an unspoken element here. Though sometimes for safety or other issues, teachers need to make the final decisions, adults trust that usually student decisions are appropriate.

On the other hand, as important as these meetings seem according to parents, only one of the children spoke about them. In her opinion, these meetings are not very helpful and she does not really want to get involved with making or changing school rules. She said, "it's boring and it takes a long time and then everybody disagrees with you." As well, she indicated that the students "just say stuff that doesn't matter at all." Further, she does not like to take her turn chairing the meetings anymore because "whenever I am the chair and I do something wrong, all the teachers point out to me 'No, no. Pick his hand.' And they always do it for me."

I did not specifically ask the other students about these meetings, and they did not mention them. Did it just not occur to them as an experience to talk about or did they purposely choose to not discuss the meetings? Are these meetings problematic for others? I wonder if this idea of participation or interest in these types of meetings perhaps relates to a concern raised by one of the parents:

> I don't think the school is always really great at teaching what I wanted for my kid, which was kind of learning to be a responsible person in Community. And they try, but when you give kids a lot of freedom, you also need to have a lot in place to teach them how to be good members of Community and be responsible for other people and not end up with a bunch of entitled kids who are just going 'Me, me, me, me, me. I get to decide, it's all about me.' And Parkway does OK at that, in fact, it probably does pretty well at that. I wish it did it better.

This parent has raised an important concern. However, whether or not, and to what extent, students engage in school meetings, these meetings seem to provide at least the potential for children to impact the school and one another. The structure of Committee provides a different leadership opportunity. I turn next to a discussion of that.

Committee

In every mainstream school I have visited, either as a student or an educator, children are always, without a doubt, sent to the principal's office for any number of issues. At Parkway Alternative, though there is a part-time principal, Committee seems to

take the place of being sent to the principal's office. As one parent mused, "Actually, the kids kind of joke, it's a little bit like sending somebody to the principal's office, so you know, 'I called Committee on you!'"

This parent continued by explaining how Committee works:

> In theory, teachers work hard to help problems to be solved in the moment, but if they can't be then you go to Committee. Committee is set up at a certain time…. there will be three or four kids sitting on the Committee who will be representative of different age groups, the little kids and the bigger kids and then one adult and then the two involved parties. Each of the involved parties will tell their story and then the kids on the Committee will basically decide what needs to happen.

One of the student interviewees commented briefly on a Committee experience. She said that in reflecting upon the meeting involving several friends and another student who annoyed them, she gained a different perspective of the situation. That is, she realized that her friends had been part of the problem and it was not all to be blamed on the other student. Committee, it would seem, has the potential to support children in taking an unbiased look at issues of personal involvement or concern. As well, the fact that children are offered an opportunity to work out problems and support one another in this way, is yet another example of the trust that is placed in children, the value that they are granted.

One of the parents talked about the impact of Committee on individuals within the school and the personal growth that can happen for children:

> There's some kids that through the conflict resolution at the school have really grown, like ones that had really dominating personalities, that would boss the other kids around and stuff like that. It's really amazing because it's through their peers that they really grow. Their peers will say, "I'm calling Committee on you" and then it's like, "I love you but I have to call Committee because you …" And it's really amazing that they can be that little and talk that way and say, "You have an anger problem," or whatever. So, a lot of these kids have really major problems. I don't think they would get resolved in a regular school. But over the years you see them develop; it's really amazing. Also for everyone to be involved in that, I think it's still really a good environment to really learn about life and how to survive in life. And not some life in the future – this life that they are involved in now, what is important to them now.

As this parent suggests, children with such "major problems" as discussed above, would likely not be solved in this way in a mainstream school. These children would likely be categorized as problematic or with a deficit that needs fixing. There would be multiple

trips to the principal's office, along with various meetings with parents and experts, visits with social workers or counsellors and the like. The growth of children as described through Committee over time signifies that the adults in this study not only trust that children will learn academics, but also that they will grow socially and emotionally. Perhaps time is what is needed to address the earlier concern about children becoming responsible community members.

As discussed earlier in this analysis section, there is a sense at Parkway that what children have to say and what children need are important and worthwhile. Committee is one way the value of children, and what children have to say, is both demonstrated and enshrined. This belief and practice is not reserved solely for children to sort out their problems with one another. According to one parent,

> Kids can, theoretically, call Committee on teachers if they feel like teachers have done something inequitable or unfair.… we had one parent go nutty one day…. and kids called Committee and he had to come into Committee and work it out with the kids…. they don't want to call Committee on adults, but theoretically they can. Sometimes they do.

This type of powerful process lets children know both that they are valued, and that they have the power to impact the world around them. In this regard, children and adults are equals. As well, it would seem that children are not the only ones who learn from these experiences. Interestingly, however, none of the children talked about calling Committee on adults.

Children and parents interact and develop relationships with one another. Part of this reason, I believe, is because parents are encouraged to become involved as much as possible. Because the strong presence of parents in the school community influences and impacts student experiences, this phenomenon needs to be considered in greater detail. Thus, next I explore the importance of adult involvement.

Parents and Other Volunteers

Children are not the only ones who have the opportunity to influence the community. Parents are encouraged to spend time at the school, read to children and share their talents and interests. As a result, as discussed above, parents have an opportunity to see growth in others as well as in their own children. Parental presence and

involvement in the school greatly influences the experiences of students, similar to Moore's Creek (Dunn, 1998).

Each of the parents and two of the children in this study talked about the importance of parent and other volunteers, some of whom are graduates of the school. One of the students explained that the school is "community based." When I asked for a further explanation, he said,

> There's really involved parents in the school. They have a monthly meeting or something. And it's for the staff and the parents and they talk through decisions and stuff, and most of the decisions for the school go through the parents. It's talked about in Community, and it's not just done with the teachers and principal.

Another student talked about one of the school's volunteers, describing her as "the best teacher ever." Parents reflected on the importance of volunteers, as well. One parent explained some of her own involvement:

> There's a high expectation of parent involvement and that parental involvement gets played out much more when your kids are younger. So with my first kid, I would say up until about Grade 3, I had a lot of involvement in the school, I spent a lot of time there…. I'd go in and read books to the kids. Sometimes I went in and did art projects with the kids, and as my kids got older, I did less and less. They didn't need me there as much.

Volunteers have the opportunity to share strengths and interests. Regarding parent volunteers, one of the moms said:

> What it's supposed to really be is that the parents become educated to be classroom volunteers who are effective for students. So they're supposed to act as opportunities for the student. The parent comes in with a type of knowledge that the student might not get from the other teachers, and says "I can offer this to you if you're interested in participating." There are many parents who come in to do that. Really, our community is better every time a parent comes in to give what it is that he or she is able to give.

Parent respondents talked about some of the various talents that are shared with children by volunteers at the school, such as woodworking, art and music. Parents and other volunteers were described as being and providing "opportunities" for children.

As well as working directly with students, parents talked about the chance for all parents to share their skills through work on various committees, such as Equity, Healthy Snacks and Fundraising. The fact that parents have the opportunity to impact their school

so greatly is impressive. It is not simply a matter of token involvement. Parents help make important decisions. One respondent explained that parents decided

> how we wanted the school structured. For example, we used to have three classrooms and as my child said, we got rid of that so just had two groupings of kids and, the idea that we really wouldn't like grades at all, is what we'd prefer.

Of course, though their voices are always heard, they do not always agree on how the school should run. According to one parent,

> The biggest challenge at the school is parents who come into the school not understanding what free school is about and expecting that students should behave in a certain way and wondering why they don't do things in a certain way.… That's always a bit of a struggle to get parents to really understand free schooling…. they don't think about the students directing it, they think it's the parents who should be directing.

Dunn (1998) similarly learned "that many of the parents who choose Moore's Creek do so without having a clear understanding about what the school is about" (p. 28).

When I asked this parent in my study for an example, she talked about ideas related to violence. While the school "doesn't want any physical violence," there are ongoing debates about how this concern gets played out and whether or not students should be allowed to show violence in their artwork:

> The people who want everything very peaceful, don't believe that violent drawings are ever appropriate.… So, that group of people believes, 'No you have to tell them from the beginning it's just wrong and they can't do it.' Free schoolers never believe that you should ever tell people what's wrong or 'You can't do it.' Instead, you have to let them learn for themselves, how to deal with life, so they can actually be committed to it in the future. And they can take personal responsibility. Personal responsibility isn't as important for some people.

This discussion may link to another parent's concern about personal responsibility that was discussed earlier.

Regardless of how it unfolds, parent involvement is not only encouraged, it is built right into the structure of the school. As at Sudbury Valley (Greenburg, 1995), this school works closely with parents. Parents are considered an "integral part of the picture." One of the integral ways parents have been able to impact the school has been through work on an Equity policy. Since the theme of diversity and equity seemed to play a large role in two parent interviews, I discuss it separately next.

Diversity and Equity

Several adult participants discussed issues of diversity and equity that impact Parkway Alternative, and thus student experiences. One parent said, "the school's alarmingly white, given where it is; it doesn't reflect the diversity of the city at all." This parent and another both talked about the school's important work concerning equity, including the new admissions policy at the school. One of these parents indicated that when her child started at the school it "was even less diverse than it is now." However, she also indicated the community's willingness to develop and grow:

> they know they haven't been that successful in the past with diversity, so we have been really working on that since we were there.… it's been just amazing just in three years to see the change. But you know that they really have so much trust in the kids but also in families that you can do things that will affect the school and change it. They don't try to control everything – it's kind of amazing.

This experience may be similar to Moore's Creek's attention to community awareness (Dunn, 1998). In the beginning at Moore's Creek there were proactive "efforts to reach the black community. Since minority, low income parents may not have as much access to information about optional schools as white, upper class parents, public information is particularly important in insuring racial and socio-economic balance" (p. 21).

Though a more thorough investigation concerning equity and diversity is necessary to fully understand its impact on students, it appears to me that the parents interviewed for the present study want their children to benefit from a diverse learning experience. For various reasons, they have chosen an environment that is actively seeking diversity.

Diversity within Parkway Alternative was seen as positive, but the diversity can at times be cause for challenges within the community. According to one parent, these challenges are part of what makes the community so appealing:

> The greatest benefit is really to live in Community. But like in any democratic community there's people that you may not choose as your friends. You have very different values. So, it's really a benefit to have to be tightly working together with people that are all diverse; but it's also sometimes challenging. And then you kind of prefer some people to have less influence on your child... But overall, it's really a benefit to have those opportunities: to know different people; to really see how people

> live and eat and raise their families. It's a kind of intimacy that I don't think you get in a regular school.

Similarly, Chris Mercogliano (1998) discuses challenges related to racism and classism in his book about the Albany Free School. He notes various forms of racial and class tension; yet, he believes in the importance of "bring[ing] together children of all kinds in environments…free of external ranking and competition where they can discover how to share their common interests as well as understand and respect their differences" (p. 106). As mentioned earlier, I do not know the full racial, cultural or class make-up of the population of the school in my study. Parents did, however, share some information regarding their backgrounds and I turn next to this discussion.

Throughout the interviews, each of the parents who participated in this study mentioned or implied his or her higher education. As well, there is a plethora of books available in their homes and a strong interest in their children's education. In the course of one of the interviews I mentioned that I was glad to know there are public alternative school options in Ontario because not everyone is able to attend private alternatives. The parent responded with the following:

> It's what distinguishes many of us there. It's that we're people who want something different for our kids, and we're either not able or not willing to pay for private schooling. In my case, both, but really not willing…. you get a certain group of parents there…not well financially resourced, but there is a lot of social capital going on at that school.

When I asked her later about social capital and if she felt her children were more advantaged than others at the school, she said that hers was "probably not an atypical family." She further explained that the families at the school "tend to be a pretty middle class crowd" and hold a variety of occupations from musicians and artists to academics and lawyers to "lots of people without full time regular jobs and so without a lot of money." What they have in common is that they are "engaged in their kids' learning."

I did not specifically ask participants about social capital. However, this parent shared her own internal conflict about this type of school. Growing up, her father wanted to send her to a private school; her mother refused, believing that "you have to live with the people you live with and you don't get to go to an elite little enclave with a certain group of people." This thinking has caused some difficulty for this participant. She continued "this is a very interesting legacy, which puts me in some conflict about having

my kids in an alternative school…. I'm conflicted because alternative schools function in some sense as a kind of elite enclave in the public system." Are there others at this school with similar ideas? What, if anything is the community doing to address any such concerns?

There are many issues to consider regarding diversity and equity at this alternative school. Regardless, one thing is clear; that is, the parents in this study are very interested in and capable of supporting their children. Conversely, parents talked about external influences upon the school over which they have little or no control. As well, students shared related experiences. The following discussion does not address all of these questions, nor all of the external influences that may be present at Parkway or other public schools, but it supports an understanding of some of the challenges of this type of education.

External Influences

Earlier in this work, the literature review examined various conflicting philosophies and pressures upon education today. It is precisely these conflicting beliefs and pressures that play a part in the development of alternatives. Under the umbrella of a public Board of Education in Ontario, the community at Parkway Alternative is not immune to external pressures. Two parents spoke about external political influences that affect the school community, and therefore student experiences.

To begin with, it is changes in Board policy that make schools like this one possible. One parent commented that

> Now we're in a climate in the Board, at least we were – it's maybe now shifting again – but in the last two or three years all these alternative schools have opened up. The Board thought 'We're losing kids to private schools, we're losing kids to home schooling and we need to obviously create a wider range of options for kids in the public Board.'

External influences, then, can be positive. It is because of the Board's decision to fund this alternative that students are provided these experiences and opportunities.

The parent commented further, however, that the school has suffered under externally imposed cutbacks. She said, "it's very hard to implement essentially what's an

incredibly individualized pedagogy when you have the same student-teacher ratio as any other school." As an example, this parent talked about Committee:

> Cutbacks have come, and the school has suffered tremendously because it is small, so it's suffered disproportionately and because it's alternative and it requires at its core more adults anyway… things like Committee… requires a teacher to be freed from their classroom during school time and we're not a big school, we don't have anybody to pick up the slack, so who's going to be responsible for the kids if teacher A has to leave? It leaves a lot of pressure on the remaining teachers. So I would say there's some kind of logistical constraints in the last few years that have made it less functional of a system.

Committee is such a valuable component of Parkway, and parents have attempted to circumvent the logistical constraints put upon them. As well, I have learned that this school is not provided with a special education teacher. Apparently the alternative nature of this school is seen to be all that is needed to serve students with special needs. One participant said that when they raised money to hire an additional teacher to reduce the student-teacher ratio, they were "disallowed by the Board from doing that." She continued:

> The Board identified alternative schools as being elitist and the hiring of an extra teacher wasn't fair; the Board policy was uniform across the board – every kid was going to be offered the *same* thing… And that was presented to us as the union telling us we couldn't do it.… I'm sure it was just the Board's saying it, just the optics are bad: You can't have an extra teacher. You can fundraise and spend money on computers or to send your kids to Quebec, but you can't fundraise for human resources.

The issues of cutbacks and fundraising affect all schools, not just this one. School budgets are regularly reduced and schools often turn to fundraising initiatives. Of course, there are inherent issues of inequity within fundraising efforts in any school. For example, I have seen a large school in an upper class neighbourhood make as much money on one event that a small school in a lower class neighbourhood made in an entire year. In fact, according to Patty Winsa (2009),

> The gap between schools like these is growing. Thanks to parents' efforts in school councils, schools in wealthy neighbourhoods are raising more funds, while students from poor areas, who need these resources even more, are raising little money, if any. (*School funding gap gets wider*, para. 9)

The inequity surrounding the practice of fundraising is glaring; however, if schools are allowed to fundraise, should they not be able to direct the funds as they see fit?

Along with financial insecurities, this community is influenced by other policies. As mentioned earlier, one parent talked to me about the influences of the *Hall-Dennis* of 1968. She discussed how the political climate changes over time with the Board sometimes "changing its policies to allow the creation of alternative schools." In the last few years she said that, "the Board has allowed the creation of a number of other alternative schools but the window is going to be closing very soon. The Board will say, 'That's it. We're not doing it any more.'" With this issue, comes the very real concern about increased scrutiny for existing alternative schools. Depending on which way the political winds blow, they tend to "fly under the radar" with no influences from the outside whatsoever. Is that a good thing? Does it add to the notion of alternatives being elitist?

Issues of equity notwithstanding, the pressure of having to "fly under the radar" is concerning. Does this school community constantly live in fear? Are they under constant pressure to conform? If so, this pressure is not acceptable. As mentioned earlier, learning does not happen in an environment laced with fear or control. Substitute teachers may tend to come in with this type of thinking. One of the parents shared the following:

> We have these jokes when the substitute teachers come in and they say, 'OK, well, you can't use the calculator to do the math sheets' and the kids go, 'Why not?' The substitute teacher says, 'Well, when it comes time for the test, you're not going to…' and the kids go 'We don't have tests here!' The substitute teacher then says, 'Well, then, when you get your report card,' and the kids say, 'We don't have report cards.'

This attempt by an adult to coerce or control comes from traditional thinking. I recall thinking like that at one time, too. However, now I understand that real learning does not happen for a test or a report card; it happens for oneself. One of the students shared an experience that highlights the shutting down of her learning:

> There's this one supply teacher that came in. I'm not sure who he was, but he was a songwriter and I was writing songs and I was trying to write a song in music class. I didn't want to make him feel bad, but the whole entire time, he was completely changing my song.

In trying to understand the experience, I asked, "He was trying to 'help' you?" She responded with "Yes… so I threw the song away." The child, who had previously been

engaged in an activity for herself, gave up because of the control. Was this child refusing to see that she needed help? Indeed, were the teacher's suggestions better? We will never know. Regardless, that is not the issue. The point is that this child's enjoyment in the process, her involvement in the learning, was stopped because of adult interference and control.

Despite the School Board's ever-changing policies and structures and other outside attempts to influence the school this community will survive, as has Moore's Creek (Dunn, 1998). They are committed to providing an alternative atmosphere for their children to grow and develop into the people they want to be. They trust that their children will do just that.

Summary

This chapter has identified and discussed the research findings as they relate to the two main overarching questions of this study: What are the experiences of students at Parkway Alternative? and What do parents think of the learning and education of their children at Parkway? The themes that emerge include *Trust*, *Environment* and *Community*. First, within *trust* there is a strong connection to parental educational experiences and beliefs, as well as how emotions relate to learning. Second, the *environment* provides a variety of structures for students including freedom, self-directed learning and individual measures of success. Though there may be some coercion and control, big kids and little kids make meaningful choices, as do teachers. Various aspects of *community*, the third main theme offers students and adults the chance to influence the school, though there are some concerns about external pressures.

In the final chapter I draw some conclusions about these student experiences and influences, and suggest possible implications for future studies. The chapter concludes with some final words and reflections.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS

With this inquiry I set out to investigate the following: What are the experiences of children in an alternative school? and What do parents think of the learning and education of their children at this school? Though my prime motivation was to give voice to children, the voices of parents have added greatly to an understanding of this issue.

This conclusion begins with a summary of the research findings as they relate to this research problem. Next, as I contemplate the implications of these findings, I discuss many questions that have arisen from the *Findings and Discussion* chapter and suggest possible research topics for further study and revised research questions. After that, I conclude with some final thoughts and reflections about education and learning.

Summary

What are the experiences of children engaged in self-directed learning at Parkway Alternative? Students at this school are offered an environment in which they are free to make at least some decisions about their education and learning. Through the structure of self-directed learning, little kids and big kids learn through play, directed lessons and choice. The success of this learning is not evaluated and shared with children in traditional ways; rather, success is determined individually. Through Whole-School Meetings and Committee children can influence peers and the community at large.

Adults are viewed as "opportunities" for students, and parents recognize the importance of opportunities. Parents and other volunteers are involved in many aspects of school life from reading books to children to sharing their talents to helping develop school policies to support the community. It is important to note that the parents in this study talked about their own involvement with students at home, and this suggests another important aspect of education. Though the school community is actively working toward diversity, there is some concern about elitism.

What do parents think of the learning and education of their children? Parents are generally pleased with Parkway Alternative. They have specifically chosen this school for their children because it fits with their beliefs about education and learning. In particular, that it provides students with an opportunity to develop according to their own

selves, not in relation to what others think. As well, it offers something different from their traditional experiences that may have been boring or unengaging. Parents trust that their children will learn and do not need external markers of success such as grades or test scores.

Parents appreciate this school and the opportunities it offers their children. However, along with the benefits, some of the challenges to this type of education have been identified. There may in fact be some coercion and control imparted on children, and they may not have a true sense of freedom at times. As well, children may not be self-directed learners nor develop responsibility to the extent that parents might like. Furthermore, external pressures can be problematic. School Board budget cuts, for example, affect the community on a broad scale, and thus student experiences are impacted.

Though it was not my original intention, the discussion about challenges to this type of education begins to answer the question, "What influences student experiences?" As well as external influences, student experiences are closely connected to the beliefs and actions of adults within the community, both those of teachers and parents. For example, the classroom practices of individual teachers potentially impact the amount of freedom children experience. However, if it were not for the decisions of adults, who have been willing to step outside of the traditional perspective and consider an alternative, these children would not have the experiences that they do. In particular, parents in this study trust themselves and their children, and have been willing to challenge the status quo. In the words of one parent, this school is "a good environment to really learn about life and how to survive in life."

Implications

This research has important implications in at least two main areas. First, this research could impact the educational system, both mainstream and alternative. There are implications for individuals and communities, and for the structures, organization and programming within the schools. These implications invite suggestions for future research in the area of alternative educational possibilities. The second main theme

includes implications for me as a researcher and educator. These two broad areas are examined next.

Though an alternative, this school is part of the mainstream system. As a result, accountability, coercion and control, and lingering effects of mainstream education may influence what happens in the school. These influences suggest many questions and sub-questions to explore from the perspectives of students, parents and/or teachers. Following, I outline several of these questions:

Are children really free to make authentic choices? Does the need to teach a mandated curriculum influence teachers and therefore limit the freedom of students with regards to academics and structures, such as Student Meetings? How does this type of education compare with the mainstream system?

One of the parents wanted the school to do a better job of teaching children how to learn "to be good members of Community." How does this type of alternative education support personal and social responsibility? Can responsibility be forced? Is it achievable for all individuals or only some?

As one parent contends, if not all individuals are self-directed, is this type of education suitable for all children? How will we know? Has anyone ever left the school because it did not meet his or her needs? What about graduates? What kind of lives do they have?

Finally, if this type of education is not suitable for everyone, does this type of environment promote elitism? Are these children receiving an unfairly advantageous education? Is the situation in other publicly funded schools similar? Are some children in other schools disadvantaged? If so, how can the system be changed so that education is consistently equitable? Is it possible?

Whether or not these and other questions are explored through traditional research studies or internal dialogue, this community and the educational system at large may benefit from such discourse. Such discussions have the potential to impact the future of education in Ontario and beyond:

> Conventional schools remain the model for public education, while the successes of alternative models go largely unnoticed. Research and evaluation need to be more widely publicized in order to validate

> alternative schools and improve public awareness of the range of choices that are, or could be, available in American schools. (Dunn, 1998, p. 33)

It is imperative that we commit to investigating how children experience mainstream schooling and alternative opportunities, and the influences upon their experiences. As well, we must commit to considering the intent of the Ontario curriculum and how accountability measures affect teachers. It is encouraging that the Ministry of Education has begun to listen to the student voice through the Minister's Student Advisory Council (MSAC), which includes 60 Grades 7-12 students across Ontario. As identified in the 2009 MSAC Summary Report, the inaugural Council explored topics they felt were important through the following question:

> *What would a school look like that supports all students, and honours their diverse voices?* Although this question is broad and purposefully open-ended, the report topics provide an interesting answer: students' interests and needs should be the focus of the education system. (MEO, 2009b, p. 1, emphasis in original)

The Ministry is to be commended for taking this step toward innovative educational change in Ontario. This step reflects Cunningham's (2007) assertion that in order to accomplish large-scale reform, changes must be implemented at the system level. It is vital that policy makers, as well as educators and teacher candidates engage in dialogue and reflect upon their own experiences of learning, education and schooling. Without such personal reflection and consideration of the other perspective, effective educational reform will not be widespread or lasting.

Along with these larger implications for the mainstream system and alternative approaches, it is important to also reflect upon what I have learned about qualitative research through this study. The questions around which this particular study revolved supported my understanding about the need for and reasons behind alternative schools. As the study progressed, I realized that I was not only answering my initial question regarding student experiences, but also the influences upon these experiences. As a result, I revised my questions as suggested by Creswell (2007) who explains that in qualitative studies,

> we ask open-ended research questions, wanting to listen to the participants we are studying and shaping the questions after we "explore," and we refrain from assuming the role of the expert researcher with the "best"

> questions. Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem. (p. 43)

In reflecting on the interviews, there are some follow-up questions that would have supported a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. For example, I wish I had asked students to talk more about freedom and choice. If students have the power, but never really use it, what meaning does it have for them? Is their power real?

In retrospect, I also wish I had asked parents to be more explicit about how their involvement supports their children. Do parents feel their children have an advantage over children at other schools? Does success at this school presuppose a commitment on the parents' behalf?

With these thoughts and questions in mind then, I propose a revised list of interview questions. These are listed in Appendix 4. The revised list of questions is still open-ended enough to allow for participants to explore their own areas of interest, and it also allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions regarding specific aspects of the school.

Continuing to ask questions such as those raised throughout this thesis, and considering answers from a variety of perspectives, will continue to open up possibilities for our educational system. We can move forward to a place where *all* children and adults feel honoured and valued. It is my hope that this work has added to the educational debate, and in the following section, I share some closing remarks on the topic.

Final Words and Reflections

Throughout this work, I have examined how the influences upon education, such as accountability, a prescriptive curriculum and coercion and control, raise concerns for some individuals. Moreover, I have drawn attention to the validity of alternative options. These are worthwhile and necessary. We must provide choice for all individuals so that each may find individual personal success. This paradigm shift may require a willingness to step outside of our traditional beliefs about education.

The parents in this study have made this shift and have chosen Parkway Alternative. Their children are happy and successful, have more control and feel less stress than they might at a regular school. Consider one student's reflections upon her

experience in a traditional school:

> In my old school, there was this spelling book where the teacher just said, 'OK, do this, do this.' It was really hard for me to catch on. I was one page before when they were on the page after it, so it was really hard to keep up. Then I never finished it and then I had to finish it next time but then I didn't finish that … so I *hated* that spelling book. All those blank spots where I had to fill in the words.

Parkway Alternative works to alleviate this type of pressure. There is no push to keep up with the rest of the class, no falling behind. Instead, there are many blank pages for children to fill in as they choose.

The book on the mainstream system of education is not closed, either. It, too, has blanks and pages yet to be filled. Will these be filled with a prewritten script or will individuals get to decide? Time will tell. One thing is for certain: In order to truly see this book as unwritten, we must be willing to look from a different perspective. If not, we run the risk of merely seeing the blanks as spots to be filled in as we have chosen.

At the beginning of this educational journey, I was unsure of what I would find. In fact, I was not even sure what I was looking for. Early on, a fellow graduate student, Jeff Haines, made a simple reference to 'a school with no curriculum,' and this opened my eyes to possibilities. Most recently, Paul Psutka, D.O., wondered how this research has changed me? As I contemplate his question I am inundated with more questions than answers: What do I now believe about education and what will I do about it? Can I work toward changes within the system? In this atmosphere of intense accountability and a focus on achievement, what is possible? I cannot hope to satisfactorily answer all of these questions at this time. However, I am sure of this: I will continue to listen and ask questions, and my future students will be encouraged to think for themselves, ask their own questions, learn for the sake of learning… and have many, many blank pages to fill in as they choose.

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Appendix 1

Student Interview Protocol

Project:
Experience and Influence: Student and Parent Perspectives of an Alternative School

Interview Date: _____ Time of Interview:_____
Location:_____ Adult Present: ___ yes ___ no Name:_____
Student Interview (Letter Name): ____ Student Age:____ Grade: _____
Corresponding Parent Interview (Letter Name), if applicable: _____
Interviewer: Carol Williams

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience as a student at this school.

2. At school, how do you decide what you are going to learn?

3. Who do you learn with?

4. Who do you learn from?

5. Are you doing well in school? How do you know?

6. Were you at this school last year? If yes, what did you learn?

7. Have you ever been a student in another school? If yes, how does this school compare to your old one?

8. Do you get involved with making school rules or policies? If yes, what do you do?

Appendix 2

Parent Interview Protocol

Project:
Experience and Influence: Student and Parent Perspectives of an Alternative School

Interview Date: _____ Time of Interview:_____
Location:_____
Parent Interview (Letter Name): ____
Corresponding Student Interview (Letter Name), if applicable: _____
Interviewer: Carol Williams

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your perceptions of your child's experience as a student at this school.

2. Why did you decide to send your child here?

3. How long has your child been going to this school?

4. Is your child successful at school? How do you know?

5. Has your child been a student in a mainstream school? If yes, how does your child's learning/experience here compare to his/her experience in a mainstream school?

6. What do you see as the greatest benefits and challenges for your child's education in this school environment?

7. Tell me about your involvement in the school.

Appendix 3

Data Analysis Coding

Student Interviews

Personal thoughts/feelings

Choice or meeting individual needs/differentiation

Teachers

Parental or Other Adult Involvement or the idea of Community

Measure of success

Traditional Ideas or Pedagogy

Non-traditional or Alternative

Big kids/little kids

Whole- school meeting/making school decisions

Other

Parent Interviews

Benefits for child

School Structure/Teachers – TRUST

Big kids/little kids

Community

Own schooling experiences or philosophy

Issues of diversity

Measures of success – TRUST

Challenges

Parental and other adult involvement

Control

Appendix 4

Interview Questions – Revised

Student Questions

1. Tell me about your experience as a student at this school.
2. At school, how do you decide what you are going to do all day? Do you feel that you are free to decide what to do with your time?
3. Are you doing well in school? How do you know?
4. Have you ever been a student in another school? If yes, how does this school compare to your old one?
5. Describe a time when you were at one of the student meetings? How valuable do you find these? Do you like going to these? Why or why not?
6. Describe a time when you were involved with Committee. How useful do you find Committee?
7. What does community mean to you? Would you say that you are a good member of this community? How do you know this?

Parent Questions

1. Tell me about your perceptions of your child's experience as a student at this school.
2. Why did you decide to send your child here?
3. How long has your child been going to this school? Has your child been a student in a mainstream school? If yes, how does your child's learning/experience here compare to his/her experience in a mainstream school?
4. Is your child successful at school? How do you know?
5. What do you see as the greatest benefits and challenges for your child's education in this school environment?
6. Do you think your child is a self-directed learner? How does a school like this support this in your child?
7. Does this school promote elitism? Is your child receiving an advantageous education?
8. Tell me about your involvement in the school. How important is parental involvement? What if parents are unable to be involved?